

Different

day

WRITTEN BY ORION HEART

~Author's Artistic Stand~

Everything from writing to acting is an art, and those that struggle to create what others will come to enjoy or hate are artists. The ability of mass producing such arts for the rest of the world to see should be nothing more than a selfless act to feel proud of, for it isn't mass media and popularity that gives us the masterpieces we revisit to this day; it is you and I that type and toil. Lining one's pockets off the back of another's creation by holding capability over their head is an age old act known as extortion.

Though the wealthy may, to this very day, semi-control what is and isn't popular depending on the amount that can be made, they can never singlehandedly make the art they so readily profit from. As such, they are not wrong in acting how they feel they must, nor are they enemies to wage war with. They are merely people like us all, lost in the search for recognition of who we are. So until the day those with more than could ever be spent step down from their pillars of profit with humbled heads, I choose to edit, print, bind, and all around produce my own writing at great cost and meager to no profit to myself.

I welcome all arguments with an open mind and an empty pocket in the hopes one day everyone, poor or rich, can do the same. For it is human nature to want to matter, but it is desperation to try and matter upon the hard work and struggles of others.

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THIS IS THE TALE OF THE BOUNDLESS HUMAN WILL TO BE FREE, BUT WITH AN AUTISTIC KID OF CONSIDERABLE BRAVE NAMED BARTER. READ ON FOR THE UNEXPECTED AND SOME OTHER UN'S I CAN'T THINK OF RIGHT NOW. BUT MOSTLY, READ ON FOR BARTER.

DAY 1
Forgetting it's Finite

"There was a lot of bad words going on in that S-word show." He huffed his creamed-coffee eyes away from the overworked doctor and the parental cursing. "Barter knows how mom feels, but he's kinda glad to see him again; even if he was always asleep. His fifth birthday was the last time he was here; they used some of the same words then too. Is leaving your 8 year old in a funny smelling hospital room with a zombie-grandpa considered bad parenting? He'd never know, because he was the kinda kid that talked too much and got no—"

"Barter?" His grandpa rasped with a dry throat. "Is that you boy? Are you narrating your life like a brain-damaged moron again?"

Barter gulped as he crept closer to his paper-skinned relative hooked to a terrifying amount of medical machines. "Grandpa—are you a zombie?"

"Zombies don't use insults boy."

"*Oh*, what about mean zombies—"

"Stop asking stupid questions!" His sentence ended with some phlegmy hacking. His dark-brown eyes widened as he queried, "How long have I been out? You still 8?"

"Even though grandpa wasn't a zombie—"

"Stop being weird and tell me how old ya are dammit."

Barter smiled, as you never know how much you'll miss something you dislike until it's not around to dislike for yelling at you. "I'm still 8 grandpa, and you've been

asleep for months."

"Months?!" He croaked, tone then falling somber. "Well Hell…"

Barter stared up at him with a big grin; thankfully, it matched the mentally-defective cartoon character on the button a nurse had pinned to his formal shirt.

Grandpa couldn't resist returning said grin. Despite who the boy was and the headaches that came with that, he was happy to see his odd grandson. "Don't just stand there, get me a glass of water before I turn ta dust."

He zipped over to the sink and back, doing just that.

Grandpa wet his whistle as he spilt most of the water on himself, thoroughly enjoying each cooling stream slipping over his semi-numb-self. He gave the empty glass an all-encompassing '*Ah*' of refreshment and tossed it down on the blanket-thick bed. "That's the best god-damned tap water I've ever had. Your parents out there yelling at each other again?"

"Barter's mom and dad said they were gonna talk, but it's just angry people words."

"Couple a jackasses." He shook his head, knowing those two one-upping idiots had only pity and pointlessness to offer him while they were vindictively obsessed with one another.

Barter asked, "He don't know if jack-asses is like stupid? Or is it a name?"

He smiled wide at the boy's honest eyes, because, no matter how weird the kid was or acted, the boy never told him a lie. The dying man realized something oh so very humbling; the only person he had in this

world that could hear him was an autistic grandson who went wide left on the weird. "Listen carefully boy, I'm gonna die soon."

"So Barter was right, you're gonna be a zombie."

"Will ya shut up with the damn zombies already!? I'm tryin to instill some wisdom dammit!"

Barter glanced outside the window when he saw the familiar black uniforms. "His mom and dad made the police come here grandpa."

He grabbed Barter's head and turned it towards him, giving a gentle bop atop his head, like he were locking Barter's attention span in place. "Yeah-yeah, that'll be going on for a while between those two idiot parents of yours." Grandpa's gruff demeanor and tone softened like it never had as said, "You just listen, okay?"

Barter nodded, the back of his head tingling as his ears became hyper-attentive to a way speaking he'd never heard before.

"Life sucks sometimes. People think doin the same thing every damn day is good, everyone pretending that workin for someone else aint the same as giving what little time you have on earth to someone else. I shoulda given my time to her instead…but I worked my whole life doin exactly what I was told to do and got 20 wasted years of retirement with a heap of cancer for it. Moral of my sad story is this: If you live every day the same way, you'll only regret the ending you get ta your story…"

Barter's ajar mouth and distant stare said it all.

Grandpa groaned, "Didn't get through that skull a yours, did it?" He sighed as he attempted what he'd never been good at;

humbleness. "How about this. If you ate spaghetti every single day of your life, would it still taste good?"

"No," Barter promptly replied. "Barter likes different things too."

"Exactly!" Grandpa blurted with hope, the gleam of understanding in his grandsons eyes filling him with a desperate enthuse. "Don't let anyone tell you that the same thing is the best thing or their thing is the right thing." He abruptly grimaced and grabbed his chest. "I put my treasure in the shoes. Don't tell anyone about it, just take it and be different"—Grandpa's face grew flush and his breathing labored—"Live every second different. Live"—he lay his head back in exacerbation—"Live different days. Happiness is in…it's in the differences…" Grandpa's grin only graced the world for a second as his eyes fell shut to the sight of his grandson. His breath silenced after a couple cold exhales.

"Grandpa?" Barter whimpered as tears bubbled up in the corners of his eyes. "He knew Grandpa was dead, but…but he… Grandpa, please don't be gone… Grandpa! Wake up again!"

Suddenly, the machines tethered to him beeped and buzzed with dire alarms!

Nurses rushed in as Barter's mother dragged him out of the room.

His father's chocolate eyes screamed with worry as he ran past them, dark dreadlocks whipping about as he forced his way into the room.

Spats of anger exited his mother's mouth as swats of caramel brown hair whipped about; despite a similar shade of worrisome emotion upon her plain-Jane visage.

It all became inaudible to Barter, too surreal for him to truly be a part of.

Soon doctors, nurses, and police all rambled about in an utter mess of overly elaborated procedure.

A mess that flashed by for Barter like an unpleasant slideshow with a theme song of disabling anxiety. Before he knew it, he was sitting in the waiting room with a can of fruit soda and the ringing in his ears ebbing away. "Barter likes the bubbles, but he's not sure the rest is food…" He squint an eye as he tried to look inside the can.

His mother strolled in with a heavy, hazel-eyed look he knew all too well.

He immediately asked, "Where's Barter's dad?"

Her tired brow arched in annoyance. "He's in jail for being a criminal. So—"

"Is that the truth?"

She unclipped the stupid name tag she'd forgotten to take off, as she wasn't a fan of telling people her name was Daria anyways. "Let's go home. Hey, we can get some ice cream on the way. How's that sound?"

"Barter thinks ice cream is so you don't have to tell him the truth."

His mother rubbed her forehead. "Barter I—I just don't think you're ready for the truth. It's grown up stuff."

Barter smiled and stood up. "That's just what adults say when they want to not tell Barter things." He started the walk back to the car without her.

"Barter?!" His mother scoffed as she chased after him. "Wait for me, damn it."

Barter looked at his mother's hand. He knew she wanted him to hold it, but he

didn't. "If you keep grown-up-stuffing Barter's questions, he's not gonna talk to you anymore…"

"*Oh my god*," she moaned, "What the heck has gotten into you?"

"The only thing in Barter is himself."

"*Ugh*, you are the most *infuriating* child *ever*."

He walked a little faster.

"Wait! Fine-okay!" Daria despised being bested by her own 8 year old, making sure not to think about how often it'd happened; for the sake of her own sanity. "It's ice cream or I tell you grown up stuff? Those are the choices…" Little did she know, those were not good choices to give your kid.

However, Barter was not a normal kid. "Barter's ready for grown up stuff, because his grandpa's dead…" He sniffled and snuffled, but let no tears fall.

Daria's face straightened. "How'd you know that?"

"I was there, but I don't know…I mean, Barter doesn't *know* know, you know?"

She pulled her son to a stop as she kneeled down and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm so sorry sweetie. Grandpa was really sick and—"

He pulled away from her and wiped his nose. "What about dad?"

Daria dour in the face of that inquiry. "…I had your father arrested, because he violated my restraining order against him."

His arms sternly crossed. "Barter doesn't know what that is."

Too tired to come up with something better, she gave it straight. "It's a court order that keeps him away from me."

"Why would you wanna keep him away from

you?"

Daria angrily sighed. "Because he causes me emotional pains and stuff. It's grown—it's lady stuff that you wouldn't understand."

The ever-constant assumption that he wouldn't understand struck a chord with the 8 year old. "Everyone causes everyone emotion pains. That's how Barter learns to talk about it. You're doing it wrong." Barter skipped ahead and continued his walk. "And Barter already has ice cream at home! Rocky Road!" He shouted back with continuing rebellious vigor.

She kneeled there for a moment with her mouth agape. "Did I just get told off by a little kid?"

DAY 2
The Quest for Grandpa's Treasure

"LMFAO! You're such a perv!" Windy loudly jabbered from the kitchen.

Barter knew his babysitter's high volume conversation with the perv-boyfriend would give him at least an hour of inattentive babysitting.

Windy's pink pigtails wacked Barter in the face as she flopped down on the couch next to him; phone glued to her eye-liner-etched head. "I *can't*, I'm babysitting the mental kid next door."

"Barter's not mental."

She scoffed. "Ya just referred to yourself in the third person. That's like the definition of mental." Windy giggled into the phone. "I know right. No not the drooling kid, the one that looks like he was dressed by an old man."

Barter frowned at her studded school-girl mélange of moronic mammary-hugging fashion, then smiled at his simple slacks and white button up shirt.

"I dunno, I think they call it butt-burgers or something? No… …Retards don't bite, you liar!"

"Goth Windy?"

"Hey!" She snapped at him. "I thought I told you to stop calling me that. I'm an individual who doesn't adhere to your conformist titles, butt-burger boy."

Barter knew better than to argue with a

woman's independence; ironically, considering most men ten times his age didn't know better. "Sorry…"

"It's cool—well, what is it? You need some food or somethin-I'm tryin to have a conversation with my *man* here."

"Can Barter go to his room and play video games?"

"Sure-whatever-go." She went right back to the phone, working on some mental-damage of her own.

Barter wasn't sure why so many teenage people couldn't put down their tiny rectangle phones, but he assumed it had something to with genetic problems; like his high spectrum Asperger. He ran to the mess that was his room. Barter and his mother had only lived in the small house since grandpa went to the hospital, but he'd still managed to make his room look like a hoarder hole.

His mom slept on the couch most nights, and others she passed out on his bed after work and he slept on the couch.

Grandpa's room had been locked since they'd arrived, but it was time to change that.

Normally he'd video game away the night until mom got home, but today had to be different… Barter grabbed the screwdriver that he used to take stuff apart and never put back together. He cleared a pile of clothes away from the wall and jammed the tool into the edges of a vent cover!

It didn't take long for the rusty screws to break away from the wall.

His face soured at the dark and dusty insides. "Barter wasn't sure about the scary wall cave, but the treasure awaited him. He was brave enough for the different." Barter

crawled inside and then scooted right back out. He took an encouraging breath or three and skittered back inside. Barter couldn't see a thing, but he felt the dead end as his head smacked against it! "*Ow*, Barter hit his head." Barter felt around and realized the vent now went up. He wanted more than anything to crawl right back out and play video games, but that wasn't different. Barter stood up and pressed his back against the dead end. One foot after the other, he scaled it upward, just like that action movie he wasn't supposed to watch with naked boobs in it.

Most of us, 8 years old or not, rarely realize or remember that what we can do is always greater than what we think we can't do.

"Barter's doing this!" He excitedly mantra a couple of times. Barter tried not to think about anything but climbing and himself. "And so the brave Barter fights his way up the-AH! …Barter almost fell, but he isn't afraid—a lot…" He definitively decided he didn't mind heights as much as the idea of falling from them. Barter fumbled backwards into the top of the vent as he kicked his feet at the wall, trying not to slide back down.

"Hold on," Windy said as she listened. "Nope, nothing I guess. I thought I heard something. Shut up! You're such a sicko, why would a serial killer use a condom?"

The dim light from the ceiling vents gave Barter just enough illumination to see how cobb-webbed and gross it was. Despite Barter's dislike of spiders, he fought forward. His elbows and knees gave extra clomps of aggression towards any unseen

arachnids that dare diffuse his quest for different.

"Okay," Windy matter-of-factly said, "That time I swore I heard something banging around. Stop saying it's a serial killer, Chad!"

Barter's palms slipped over the dust and his forehead planted into the mental vent!

"Eek!" Windy squeaked as she jumped to her feet and stared upward. She cautiously whispered, "There's totally something in the ceiling… Why would a serial killer be in a ceiling Chad?!"

"Barter might have a bloody nose… Nope, just dust boogers. He wonders if spiders have boogers from vent dust too." He continued his ventilation questioning, this time firmly thudding his palms against it to avoid slippage.

"OMG… I hate you so much Brad—yes I know its Chad! I was trying to offend you!"

Barter looked out the first vent and saw a terrified Goth Windy huddled under the table. As much as he enjoyed the unintentional prank, he felt bad. He was no stranger to being afraid. "It's only Barter Goth Windy!" He shouted down at her.

Windy's face went awry with confusion. "What the?!" She crawled out and stared up at a dirt covered hand waving from inside the ceiling vent. "Barter!? You get out of there this instant!"

"Sorry Goth Windy, Barter has to finish his adventure first. He just didn't want you to be scared."

"Thank you—no! I mean—yes he's in the ceiling Chad. What? No-I can't just leave him up there like the elephant man."

With Windy's annoyed screeches behind him, Barter moved to the next vent. "Nope, kitchen." He curved down the side to the next. "Eureka." Barter had discovered his destination, but he didn't know how to get down to it… He crawled forward a little ways and the solution abruptly presented itself. An old portion of vent parted as he fell through the ceiling! Barter's brief scream huffed and coughed into laughter as he bounced on the bed below.

Windy gulped. "Oh that was a bad sound… Quasimodo isn't a helpful topic right now, *Chad*!"

His Grandpa's room was by far the most well organized one in the house; a light layer of absence-induced dust covered everything in a cocoa powder hue.

The bricked over area where the window had once been bore a picture of a woman he'd never seen before. Barter flicked on the nightstand lamp for a bit more light, its stained-glass shade turning the room into a colorful mural of a man's life.

More pictures, paintings, and portraits covered the walls than there was wall to be covered.

Barter scanned over it all, realizing that many of the old pictures had a man that loosely resembled his Grandpa.

In some he stood with soldiers and the rest with people that were never the same, but in none was he dressed like a soldier himself. The only constant between any of them was the one woman that his arm was always around.

"The shoes!" Barter blurted as Grandpa's words struck him like a clue in a murder mystery. He ran over to the closet

and opened it.

Two shelves of dress shoes sat against the back with a thicker layer of dust than anywhere else.

Barter reached into one of the shoes and pulled out a tight-wrapped wad of hundreds. He reached into another shoe and found the same, and the same in another, and another. "Whoa… Barter thinks this is one of those times that bad words are okay. So he says son of a—"

"BARTER!" Windy furiously screeched. "YOU GET OUT OF THE CEILING RIGHT NOW!"

He stuffed two wads in his pocket and realized it was way too obvious. "*Windy*?!" He sang from the closet. "Barter thinks he can get out! But Barter needs your help! He's in the kitchen ceiling!"

"*Errrr*-FINE!" She stomped into the kitchen, phone still attached to her head. "I can't just let him to fall out, Chad. Uh, duh, cause I probably wouldn't get paid if he died."

"Barter's so smart," he boastfully bubbled to himself. Barter quietly unlocked the door and peeked out. He could see Windy standing on the kitchen table looking into the vent. Barter dumped out all the shoes and wrapped the pile of money in one of Grandpa's flannel shirts. He slinked out, closed the door, and sprinted to his room!

"Barter?" Windy said when she heard someone run across the living room.

He'd no idea where he was gonna hide a giant pile of money, but does any 8 year old kid?

"Barter?! Was that you?! I swear butt-burger, if you're messing with me I'm gonna leave you in an alley!"

"Barter's out of time," he anxiously whispered to himself. Barter dove into the vent and shoved the shirt all the way against the back.

"BARTER!?" Windy banshee into his room.

He scampered back out of the vent.

"AH! Oh my god-you little…! What the heck is wrong with you!? I-know-what-a-mental-disability-is, shut up Chad."

"Sorry Goth Windy. Barter was—on a secret adventure…" He smirked.

"Whatever, no more secret whatever's-and you're *so* gross looking now." She huffed at the filthy child.

Barter often felt oblivious to the feelings and reasoning when it came to other people, but for some reason he just got it this time. "Don't worry Goth Windy, Barter won't tell mom you lost him in the wall and/or ceiling."

She smiled and sighed. "Whatever butt-burger, just—go take a shower please."

He ran off to do just that with his arms out like a victorious fighter jet gliding down upon the runway, as a non-specific metaphor…

Windy kneeled down and barely peeked inside the open vent before gagging away. "*Ew*, why would anyone climb inside such a gross dark hole—classy Chad, you're such a nasty pervert. …I don't care if coconut oil's antibacterial, I'm not doing it." She propped up the vent cage with her toes and kicked it a few times with her heel to get it back into the wall. "Seriously though, what a freakin *weird* kid…"

DAY 3
Initiate Plan Different

It was Saturday, which meant mom would be in any second to wake him up with a kiss and run out the door to work. But Barter was already awake…

"*Time to wake up sweetie*," Daria sang as she popped into the room. She slapped a big smacking-kiss atop his forehead. "I already called Windella to come and watch you."

"She likes to be called Windy you know," Barter yawned. "But Barter likes Goth Windy better."

She gave him a curious look. "You're awake and talking… You're never awake and talking when I leave. Are you feeling okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine mom, Barter just thought he'd do something different today." He gave her a wide joker smile.

"*Okay*? Please behave for Windella or Windy or whatever."

He nodded.

Daria couldn't shake the feeling that something was off about her son. "Is everything—are you sure you're okay? Did you wanna talk about Grandpa or anything?"

She was right, Barter was now weaning himself off of normal with a wall-crawling victory under his belt for a self-confidence boost. "Did you wanna talk about dad or anything with Barter?"

She cleared her throat; something was absolutely wacky with him. "We should talk.

I mean, you know I want you to have a relationship with your father, but he won't do the things he's supposed to do."

He felt like the usual haze of misunderstanding was taking a nap in the back of his head. "You mean the things you want him to think he's supposed to do?"

Her jaw dropped, doing her best to recalibrate her plan of parental attack.

But Barter was one minute-hand ahead. "You're gonna be late mom."

She glanced at the clock on the dresser. "Oh crap! Damn it! Yeah, um, okay, uh, we'll talk more about this later and—yeah, behave." Daria gave him one last kiss and curious glance before running out the door.

Barter hopped right out of bed. He sadly sighed at the many similar slacks and button shirts in his dresser he'd once found comfort in. "Hmm, hum, *hmm*, if Barter's gonna be different he's gotta dress different too. No more old man clothes—or maybe more old man clothes…" He zipped out of his room and into his Grandpa's.

The house was silent in the current morning lull; perfect for mischief.

Unsurprising to Barter, everything in Grandpa's drawers looked like old people clothes. After he cleaned ceiling off of the bed into a waste can, out of respect, he went to the closet. Everything was way too big and too fancy. Barter yanked out a thick layer of something underneath a thin paper cover. "Ooh-Barter likes this."

A knock at the front door made him jump. He ran out with the mystery garment, shut the door, ran to his room where he left it, and then ran to the front door. "Who—

is—it?" He huffed.

"Open the door butt-burger."

"Who is it?" He asked again, because his mother had taught him better.

"Seriously!?"

"Who is—"

"It's Windy!"

Barter opened the door. "Hi Goth Windy. Barter believes you should tell people your name or they'll think you're a kidnapper."

She scoffed and pushed her way inside. "Nobody wants to kidnap a freakoid like you."

They plopped down on the couch together, like usual, and turned on cartoons, like usual.

Windy texted away on her phone like the needy attention-addict we all are with them.

"Can Barter watch something different?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

He shrugged.

"Fine-whatever." She changed the channel to the news.

Goth Windy seemed a little grumpier than usual to him. Which was odd, because he'd never really thought to pay attention to how grumpy she was and had no clue why he now was. After a minute of watching the nincompoop people on the news, he said, "Barter thinks these people are not so—you know?"

Windy rolled her eyes. "No, I don't know."

Barter rolled his eyes. "You're older than him, so you do know."

"OMG-what're you talkin about butt-burger?!"

"The news people." He vigorously pointed at the TV. "They seem, you know,

that word that's when someone isn't really a person…"

Windy chuckled. "You mean fake?"

"Yeah-that-one! They're fake, like liars or androids or both. They're also too shiny looking."

She actually lowered her phone for a moment. "Since when do you notice anything about anyone?"

"Oh-I'm different now."

She scoffed, "Really?"

"Yup. I even know you're less like you today, but you're more mad too."

"You don't know anything butt-burger," she grumbled as she leapt back into texting.

"Barter wonders what the school word is for learning about how people act. You know, like numbers is math."

The tediously tapping teen mumbled, "Psychology."

"What?"

"You're-talkin-bout-psychology! Gosh you're freakin annoying today."

"Oh, okay. Thank you."

She sighed. "You're welcome…" Windy suddenly gasped. "OMG-it's Chad…"

"Your boyfriend?"

"What? I dunno-shut up! I liked it better when you ignored me all day."

He plainly explained, "Barter didn't."

Windy's face grew abruptly dire.

It was the first time Barter had ever seen her so upset. Normally, he'd watch her fingertips tap away in reply, but this time she hesitated. He was beginning to wonder just how long people have been this fascinating.

Windy very slowly tapped but a few letters in. Her finger hovered over the send

icon.

Barter suddenly realized he'd had that same expression before, especially in the face of peas and green beans. "You shouldn't do things you don't like."

"What!?" She nervously quacked. "What're you talkin about?! Did you read my texts?!"

"No, he didn't read them, but you looked like you didn't wanna do that last text." Barter noticed so much more than he'd ever thought he could about a person in a moment. He saw her breathing quicken like she were scared and her eyes widen like his did when he first crawled into the dark vent.

Windy hit the send button. "I have to do something…" She got up and walked into the bathroom.

Now it's important to remember that Barter would've never, in a million years, gotten up and did what he did then and there, but he did. He walked right over to the bathroom door and opened it.

With her back turned and her shirt up, Windy's phone flashed. She dropped her shirt back down and almost dropped the phone. "WHAT THE HELL! GET OUT!" She screamed with unfallen tears.

"You look like you wanna cry, why?"

Windy's face was as red as it got as her hand shook with the phone in it. "You—I… You're just a stupid mental kid that doesn't understand shit!"

"Why'd you take a picture of your boobies?"

"Oh my god!" She squealed. Windy sat down on the toilet lid and sobbed. "You can't tell anyone about this, ever, okay?"

Barter's brain did more leg work than he'd let it ever do. "*Hmmmm*, umm, isn't that what people say when they do something bad?"

"I haven't done anything, yet…"

Barter smiled. "That's good, then you don't have to."

Windy's head fell into her lap. "I don't—it's not that simple… Just—please don't tell anyone, and leave me the heck alone…"

"Barter thinks you should do something different, something that makes you happy instead of—this."

Windy took a deep breath. "You are one weirdo freak butt-burger."

"*Hmm*, Barter wonders what psychology would do right now?"

She laughed. "Probably ask me how I'm feeling."

"How're you feeling?"

"I don't know," she sobbed in reply. "Pressured and uncomfortable-and did I really just tell you that?! I'm such a screwed up person."

"I don't think you are." He sat down on the bathroom floor beside her. "Maybe it's like how Barter is? People used to say there were things wrong with Barter and called him names and that made him sad. But Barter stopped listening to their words and listened to what makes him happy. Then Barter realized adult stuff. He realized that sometimes the only reason you think you're not good is because other people who aren't as good as *they* want to be want you to feel like them."

Windy smiled, then sad-chortled, and then humbly sighed. "You know, you're like the smartest retarded kid I've ever met."

"Thank you."

"So—I can't believe I'm about to ask you this—but what do you think I should do about this?" In an epic brain-fart of a moment, induced by old-fashioned upset, Windy showed him the unsent picture text.

Barter's eyes widened in shock, not knowing if it was ruder to keep looking or look away.

She saw his face and yanked the phone away in utter horror. "*Shit*… I'm *so* sorry! Great! Now I'll probably go to prison for pedophilia-and it won't be-like orange-is-new-black-or-showers-and-I don't-wanna-be a lesbian!" Her words fell away into inaudible cry-rambling.

"*U~m*, Barter didn't understand most of that… But you have pretty boobies and he's seen boobies before."

"Really?" She replied with hopeful optimism. "So I didn't, like, corrupt your youthful innocence and stuff?"

"Nah, Barter's been through some S-word."

Windy laughed.

Even though a small part of him was missing staring at cartoons, a much bigger part of him was beaming with palatable potential. "Barter doesn't know much about boy and girl relationships, but you could tell him why you have trouble with phone-boobies and he could maybe help you?"

"Why not"—she tossed her hands up in defeat—"It's not like any of my fake-ass friends are giving me any good advice. I mean, Mandy just told me to: Slut it up yo."

"Friends are overrated. Barter knows because he doesn't have any."

That tidbit of sad info made it 100%

easier for her to open up. "Okay, so like, Chad wants me to do all kinds of sex things with him-but I told him I'd like to date more than a couple weeks before I do-but then he said that was bull and I should at least send him some nude pics so he knows what's up-and if I don't I think he might leave me, because he doesn't seem to like me enough without that stuff…"

Barter was new at this whole listening to other people thing, but it was actually a lot easier than he'd thought; all you have to do is look for the important parts between all the pointless words. "Shouldn't he already like you for who you are?"

She scoffed. "It's not that simple."

"Yes it is." His chin arose with his passion. "Barter sometimes wants other people to do things for him too, but he knows if he wants that he'll have to give something back. And sometimes that's waiting until the other person is ready. That's what caring about someone's feelings is."

Windy's face fell stoic in pre-epiphany disbelief. She'd never had anyone, especially a little kid, explain the complexity of a relationship so simply to her. Windy took a moment of self-reflection as she let reality sink in deep. "You're right." She deleted the picture and texted: If you really care about me you'll wait until I'm ready.

They both awaited the phone's chipper chime with his reply.

Windy gasped at the reply. "What an A-hole!" She sent him another quick text.

Barter and Windy read Chad's text together this time: Whatever prude! I'll be gettin me some easy booty tonight anyways!

Peace out ho 'middle finger and eggplant icon'

Barter smiled at her text below that read: Lose my number D-bag and I hope you get herpes. 'Peanut, eggplant, knife icon'

She sat down next to Barter and gave him a big hug; it was the 1st real hug she'd ever given him. "Thank you, butt-burger."

"You're welcome, Goth Windy."

She sighed. "Why do you insist on calling me that?"

With his mission into difference just starting, Barter let the honestly flow out like fuel for a better way. "Barter secretly wants to be a superhero, and the best superheroes team-up to fight evil; like butt-burger and Goth Windy vs the D-bag."

She giggled away her sad and wiped away already forgotten tears. "So, you wanna watch some more fake news people or somethin?"

"No."

"Cartoons?"

"No."

"What then? Video games?"

Barter grinned. "Do you know how to sew with clothes and thread-needles and stuff?"



Daria walked into the house and yanked off her mandatory fast food straight-jacket. She groaned, "Oh my *god* I *hate* people." The silence throughout the house struck her with worry, because there was always a TV on somewhere. "Barter? Windella?"

She walked around the corner to see Windella passed out on the couch, snoring

like a mute walrus. Daria gently shook her shoulder. "Hey, Win—I mean, Windy?"

"Huh-wha? *Oh*, hey mama-D. What's up?"

"Where's Barter?"

Windy did a big face-crumpling stretch. "He's passed out in bed already. Long day of crafts and what not, ya know."

Daria looked confused. "Crafts? Are you messin with me?"

"Nah mama-D, you know I'm always straight with you."

She smiled. "Yeah, I know that Windella." Daria pulled a crumpled wad of smaller bills from her pocket. "Here, it's a little less than what I usually pay you, but I'm kinda strapped at the moment. Bills and whatnot…"

Windy yawned first and then took the money. "It's cool, pound it," she said as she held up her fist.

Daria acquiesced said sociologically accepted fist-bump. "Thanks for understanding. So, what kinda crafts you two do?"

Windy smiled. "I'll let him tell you. After all, it was his idea." She took one more body-jittering stretch. "Well, I'm out." She got up and tiredly scooted towards the door.

"Goodnight Windella."

"Night mama-D."

Daria's visage skewed with curiosity. "That girl seemed a lot happier than usual…" She went to check on Barter, but for some reason she stopped at Grandpa's door. Daria's powers of motherly deduction made her reach down and twist the handle; it opened. "What the Hell?!"

She walked in just a little and glanced

around. Daria started to wonder if she'd hallucinated it being locked all this time. After a 9 hour shift at the byproduct redistribution box with a parking lot, she was too tired to care. Then Daria looked up at the hole in the ceiling and found a little concern. "Was that always there?" She closed the door and continued to his room, or their room, or just the room.

Barter was comfortably passed out in bed, blankets askew and spread about as though he'd been dropped from an airplane.

She smiled, sat down beside him, and stroked his head. A part of her wanted him to wake up. Daria's heart ached a little everyday she thought about how much of his life she'd missed, supposedly working to make his life better. To her it was like creating one of the most beautiful things you'll ever create, and then the rest of the world forces you to be away from it for the sake of it; nothing short of an idiotic contradiction. She glanced around in search of something she could quietly guilt-clean, then rubbed his head a little harder.

"*Mmmmm*-Barter's sleeping," he grumble-whined.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you." She kinda very much did. "How was your day?"

He gave a proud, yet sleepy, smile. "It was different."

Daria knew it was an odd question to ask, but she asked anyways. "Hey, did you or Windella unlock Grandpa's room?"

He hesitated. "Kinda, yeah…"

"Really? How?"

He yawned, "With Barter's hands."

Daria laughed under her breath. "You never cease to amaze me." She kept on

petting him to selfishly keep him awake. "You didn't mess with anything, did you? I don't know if Grandpa has anything dangerous in there, so—"

"No mom," he griped. Barter felt awful about lying to her, but there was no other choice, for now… "Barter's tired." He tucked his head under a pillow and mumbled, "Barter saved Goth Windy's boobies from the D-bag today-so he sleeps now…"

"What the?" She dismissively shook her head and jabbered to herself, "Nah, there's no way that's what he said." Daria plucked the pillow off his head and gave only the most gentle of cheek kisses. Daria stood up to go become more acquainted with the couch, and that's when she saw it hanging up on the wall. She tilted her head at it, like any good parent would. "Oh-I really hope he doesn't wanna wear that to school…"

DAY 4
Dad Rhymes with Mad & Sad

Barter awoke to the sound of a familiar familial fighting. The usual B-words from dad and A-words from mom. He leapt up to the window, regretting the oogy wobbles from doing so.

His folks stood in the front yard making a scene.

"Why'd they even let you out?!" Daria harped. "You're a scumbag criminal, *Dusky*!"

Dusky shook his head. "Oh I don't know. Maybe they let me out because you had me arrested at my father's DEATH BED!"

She crossed her arms. "The restraining order expired, didn't it?"

"OH MY GOD!" Dusky blurted in exhaustion. "You're so delusional!"

"Please, you're the delusional one."

"You're right! I actually thought you might *not* act like a wacko on the day of my Dad's funeral. Guess I am delusional!"

Barter turned away from the fight outside and stared at his new outfit. Normally, he'd wait out the chaos and hope he got to see his father for a little bit, but after yesterday he was done with normally. He grabbed the white outfit, whipped it on, and ran to the rescue.

"You *need* to *leave* Dusky!"

"This is *my* Dad's house you crazy b—"

"BARTER SAYS SHUT UP!"

The parents looked down at their Kung-

Fu Gi clad son; embroidered green flames down his sleeves, colorful hearts above his heart, and the phrase 'Be The Difference' in black across his back.

Still a little stoned from earlier, Dusky chuckled, "What are you wearin boy?"

Daria sternly pointed at the front door. "Go back inside young man."

"Barter's not gonna do that. He's done with you guys calling each other B's and A's."

Daria's nostril flared with further agitation. "Take your butt back inside right——"

"No mom!" He asserted with a newfound confidence. "Barter's gonna see his dad and talk, but first you two are gonna apologize to each other for being mean. And no more bad words. He wants you to use your names."

Dusky scoffed, "Yeah-right. I know you don't understand this, but your moms a self-deluded narcissist with a——"

Barter hopped forward and kicked his dad in the shin!

Dusky hobbled about. "What the!? Why!?"

"Barter thinks a narcist is a bad word, and he said no more bad words dad."

Daria stood in silenced shock, wondering just how counter parental it'd be to laugh right now.

"Barter's sorry for hitting you, but mom says she wanted to kick your A-word a buncha times, and he's too short to reach it with his foot."

Daria let the laughs out for a good 5 seconds. "That's right! Now get out of here before I call the cops!"

Barter grabbed his mother's hand and peered into her eyes in a way he'd never

done before; kinda like a crazy person. "No mom, go inside so Barter can talk to his dad."

She scoffed. "What has gotten into you?! And *no*, you're gonna go back inside—"

"Dad's gonna die mom."

Daria squawked, "What!?"

"Dad's dad died, and one day Barter's dad will die too. Don't make it your fault he never got to see him."

His mother gasped with a choking throat-catch, then shook her head, then waved her finger at him. "You know what—I'm gonna—there's a phone inside"—she turned a glare at Dusky—"I just might use it to call the cops… So don't do anything to my son, or else…"

Dusky released his shin as he tossed his hands out. "Like what you stupid b—"

Barter shot his dad a glare.

"I-uh, I mean, I'd never do anything to hurt my son you—crazy lady-person?"

She slowly walked back inside; her death-gaze heavy upon Dusky.

He ignored her and held out his arms to his boy. "Barter! I—"

"Where've you been Dad?"

"What? No hug for your old man?"

Barter sighed. "Come and sit with Barter for talking."

Dusky mumbled under his breath, "Man, my kids gotten even weirder…"

They walked over to the shade of a large willow hanging over the neighbor's fence and sat down.

"Barter wants his dad to be here from now on." He'd wasted no time saying what he'd wanted to say every single time his

father swooped in for a day, and it felt freeing.

Dusky dawned a baffled look for a second before a cocky smirk graced his cheeks. "Life isn't that simple kid. I'm a free spirit who wants to change the world with his unique philosophy. But suburbia has this evil energetic resonance that counters my radiance."

Barter scratched his chin in contemplation. "So you're a free spirit?"

"That's right."

"So then you're free to do whatever you want?"

"Exactly my boy."

Barter smiled. "Good, that means you're free to stay here with Barter for as long as he wants you to."

Dusky's jaw dropped as, "*Uh*," fell out.

Barter held up a stern finger reminiscent of his mother's. "Barter's serious dad, either you stay now or never come back. A father figure's important to a kid's maturation process."

"Lil bro, you sound like an infomercial."

"Barter's not sure what that means, but he's serious dad."

"Alright-alright. Geez, you're startin to sound like your mother…"

He laughed. "That's impossible dad, I'm a boy."

Dusky chortled. An abrupt seriousness grew upon his face. "Listen, Barter, I'd love to stay longer, but—"

Barter interrupted with a pouty, "You always say that and then leave…"

"It's not my fault—"

"You say that too…"

Dusky rubbed his forehead in agitation, wishing he'd smoked more pot this morning. "Come on, I mean, what do ya want me to do, huh? The police harass me about sleepin on the street in my van; they like to call it camping or whatever crap. And your moms always being a bit—pain in my butt, what with the freedom stealing legal crap." He dramatically motioned to the police cruiser as it pulled up. "See what I mean!"

"If Barter can fix all that, you'll stay for as long as he says?" The boy named Barter offering a straight forward trade.

Dusky shrugged. "Sure?"

"I'll be right back." He headed off the police right as they got out of the squad car. "Barter wants you police to go away."

The husky senior officer chortled. "Are your parents around son?"

"Yes, they are." Barter dug deep to a place he'd never been and pulled out ever weapon he could muster from his autistic arsenal. "However, since there's no crimes here-if you don't leave now Barter will go tell his god-aunt senior reporter Diana Folknor about how you wouldn't let him see his dad cause he's homeless"—the lip quivered—"Just"—the tears bubbled—"Like"—the balling began—"This!"

The officers looked perfectly perturbed.

His partner leaned in and whispered, "Isn't that the lady from the evening news?"

The senior officer looked down at Barter's sobbing smirk. "I'm too old for this crap," he grumbled under his breath. Just then, an emergency call came in from the radio on his shoulder. "Sorry to bother you kid."

The officers zipped back into their car and sped off as he wiped away the false tears. He'd no relation to any news person, but he'd a great memory for the things he watched on TV.

Daria ran out a few minutes too late. "What the?! Barter, where are the police going?!"

He crossed his arms at his mother. "They're leaving and you're gonna stop calling them on dad and he's gonna sleep in his van in front of the house for as long as Barter says so."

Daria chirped, "Say what!?" She grabbed him by the ear! "That's not up to you young man! Now you—"

Barter painfully yanked his ear away and yelled his truth, "OW! STOP IT! NO MORE! YOU HATE BARTER'S DAD BUT BARTER DOESN'T! SO STOP IT!"

Daria was at a loss for words.

Dusky slinked up and cautiously said, "Um, hey, sorry to interrupt, but I promise I won't cause any trouble. It's just me in the van this time."

She looked down at her son and simply couldn't do it. As much as she hated the man for abandoning her, she loved Barter more. "Fine, but any drugs or anything and you're gone Dusky."

The son finally hugged his father.

Daria shook her head. "It's time to get ready for Grandpa's funeral. *So*, you should come inside, Barter and *only* Barter…"

Dusky raised his palms in peace without uttering a word; he waited for his ex to be far enough away for that. "Holy Hell Barter!" He quietly shouted. "How'd you do all that kid?"

He grinned with pride as he confidently adjusted his new outfit. "Barter's different now."



Barter was very unhappy with his forced wardrobe change's formality, how he couldn't ride with his dad, and now he had to sit on uncomfortable wooden benches while some guy in a ridiculous robe yammered on about nonsense that had nothing to do with his Grandpa. He also hated how his mother would always literally put him between her and his father. "Barter has to pee," he whispered to his Mom.

"No you don't," she impatiently whispered back, "You'd be doing your little pee-pee dance if you did. So sit still and be quiet."

Barter huffed in defeat. "These seats hurt Barter's butt…"

"Shh," Daria hushed with a finger up to the lips and everything.

The mother and son guiltily lowered their heads when they noticed Dusky glaring at the both of them.

Barter also was not a fan of having to suck it up as he grumbled, "Sorry Dad…"

Minister Gibbins let the last statement sit for a second before he went into his final words. "And that is why I believe complicated men like Dervin Elrish—"

Barter was shocked by how dumb his Grandpa's name was; more so than the fact this was the first time he'd heard it.

"Choose to simply have their ashes returned to the land beneath a headstone; Plot 23 J at Wilker Cemetery. Rather than

burden their family and friends, they give them the *freedom* to say *goodbye* in settings like this—"

Barter knew that was just a crappy adult way of saying Grandpa was cheap; not that he wasn't, a frugally stashed mini-fortune being the proof.

"Men like Dervin knew how important it was to *remember* our brothers and sisters that are no longer with us. To *remember* that in the Lord's eyes we are *all* from humble beginnings and ends. So please, love one another like family, because god gave us only a set time to do it. Now, before I ask others to come up and speak about Dervin, I'd like to invite someone very special up first. Dervin's estranged son he'd had the great joy of becoming reacquainted with in the last 10 years of his life, Dusky Davidson."

Even after his name had been called and the congregation clapped, Dusky's butt was planted in his seat. He'd thought about what to a say a hundred times, and still had no idea what to say.

Barter tugged on his Dad's shirt, recognizing the scared look on his face, and whispered, "It'll be okay Dad."

Dusky let himself breathe again. "Thanks Barter…" He stood and made his way to the daunting podium. Dusky still had no idea what to say, so he went with what he knew. "My father was—well, he was kind of a dick."

Thankfully the congregation had a sense of humor, more chortles than headshakes from those attending.

Dusky nervously laughed a little himself, but the tears wet his eyes and

pierced through his anxiety. "We actually weren't huge fans of each other, but we always tried ta be nice ta one another. I think it's because neither of us wanted to be alone and we were the only family we had left…" It dawned on Dusky like he'd never dared assume it could. "I remember…I remember catching him crying into mother's picture one day, and the only thing he'd say to me was that he wished it was different; I think he meant that in every way possible. So please, for my father, for the man named Dervin, start spending your days making damn sure there is no way you can say the same."

The congregation stayed silent for a minute as Dusky turned away from the podium; mike-drop style. Claps and coos quickly carried up towards the ceiling before the son could make it back to his seat. Dusky wiped away his tears with vigor as he sat back down.

Barter had no idea what kind of kingdom the minister had been talking about, but the one right here on the planet he lived on seemed much more interesting. "Barter never knew his Dad could talk like that… Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Dusky replied in a snap, as though barely able to accept his own words without a breakdown.

Minister Gibbins began calling others up to tell their tales of knowing the quirky creation that was Dervin.

Barter had no desire to go up and say anything, because he felt the memory of his Grandpa better honored by the actions he'd yet to take.

DAY 5
It's never Uniform day

His dad wasn't awake when he'd left for school; Dusky having had quite the emotional mess of a yesterday. But when he thought about it, his dad had never been awake in the morning.

Daria glanced back at Barter in the rear view mirror the whole way there. If only she'd more time to convince him to change his wardrobe. They pulled up in front of his drab public school and the words just leapt off her tongue. "Why'd you have to wear that to school?"

"Don't be afraid of different mom. Barter's not." He hopped out before she could utter another word wrung societal judgement. Barter waited for his mother's greenish hooptie car to be out of sight. He stashed his backpack in a bush and sprinted down the street.



A block or two later and Barter repeatedly slammed his palm against the door of Goomba's Pizza.

The husky owner jogged out from the back. His bushy black brow skewed when he saw the oddly dressed kid standing out front. He opened the door and said, "We're closed little guy. Shouldn't you be in school?"

"Yes-and-no," Barter huffed. He yanked a carpet of hundreds out from his pocket and

stuck it up at the man. "Barter needs lots of pizzas!"

The owner's orchid eyes lit up at the money, until they humbled with confusion. "Um, who's Barter?"

"He is."

"Who is?"

"*Me*."

The owner hated to look that many hundreds of gift-horses in the mouth. "Where'd you get all that——"

"Barter needs enough pizza's to feed a school, and he needs them delivered to Oliver Middle School cafeteria at 12:30 lunchtime."

The owner scratched his head. "I don't understand. Is this a prank or——"

"No prank, school food is sad food. Barter's gonna be late if you don't take his money for pizza. And make sure there's plenty of extra-extra cheese pizzas."

"*U~h*, okay?" He shrugged and took the cash that was being shoved into his hand anyways.

Barter ran off as he shouted, "Thanks pizza-man! And keep the tip!"

"It's Luigi! …Well that was weird."

His flour dusted second in charge popped his head out the door and asked, "Was that kid cosplaying the hero from Killer Kung-Fu Chaos? Cause he got the hair wrong."

"Who cares, he pays well." The owner waved the cash about in disbelief. "Enough to feed a——shit! We need to get cookin!"



The veteran teacher wore her affinity for orchids in her colorful dress, and her

love of teaching in her graying black hair. She eyed Barter's empty seat for a second; forced to turn her bacon-brown eyed attention to the rest of the noise increasing class. "Okay everyone, listen up. Today we're——"

Barter bust through the door panting and wheezing!

"My goodness," the gentle Ms. Yano squeaked. "You startled me. Are you okay?"

"Barter's awesome," he heaved as he clomped over to his seat and plopped down in it. "Thank-you-for——asking-Ms.-Yano."

She knew something was up with the young man right away. However, she was too overloaded with copies of bureaucrat-training worksheets to inquire. "Like I was saying, we've got a lot of paperwork to do." Ms. Yano started handing out worksheets and did a double-take at her late student. "Barter, what are you wearing?"

Having finally caught his breath, he gave the chipper reply, "Barter's wearing good clothes now."

Some of the children laughed.

Ms. Yano opened her mouth to again inform the children of the mass amount of cubicle-work ahead, but a knock at the door stopped her.

"*Hello*." Principal Procrustean's bald head beamed through the door; his joyful attitude much less real than the bags under his eyes. "Sorry to interrupt your class, but I need a quick word with you, Ms. Yano."

She knew that couldn't be good, because it never was. "Of course, um, Esmerelda?"

"Yes Ms. Yano?" The star student promptly replied in her name-fitting green dress; the dollar signs her mother dropped

for it equally as green.

"Could you go ahead and pass these worksheets out to everyone?"

Esmerelda replied, "Of course," bouncy red curls as bubbly as her demeanor.

Barter placed a curious eye and ear upon his teacher outside the door; as that was far more interesting than worksheets. "Barter thinks something is wrong, other students…"

Esmerelda rolled her eyes at him. "Don't be weird Barter. Do your work."

Ignoring his fellow student with inherited egotism issues, Barter crept over to the door and put his ear on it.

Ms. Yano nervously cleared her throat. "I'm very sorry, I just—I find it hard to actually teach the children different and interesting subjects with there being so much paperwork now."

Principal Procrustean scoffed. "What are you talking about, everything is right there on the worksheets; just as the Ready-Core program has put together for us."

"*Yeah*…" Ms. Yano sighed. "That's the problem, I don't think the Ready-Core program is geared towards—"

"I have to say," the Principal snidely interjected, "This sudden argumentative nature of yours is very unbecoming of a teacher. Please make sure your children are up to par by the end of the week."

She mumbled, "I know it's unlike me, but—"

"I'd hate to see such a good teacher have to explain herself before the School Board for not sticking to the state approved Ready-Core program, Ms. Yano…"

The teacher heard the principals

unwavering lack of perception as loud and clear as his overt threat. "I understand. I'll get right on that."

"Wonderful," he said with a posturing enthuse. "Keep up the good work, Ms. Yano." Principal Procrustean walked away with a self-serving nose in the air and an education-damaging deaf ear.

Barter jumped away from the door, hopped atop of his desk, and blurted, "It's time for some different everyone!"

Ms. Yano walked into a quietly snickering class and a child on a desk in mid-hero pose. "What on earth is going on children?!"

Esmerelda raised her hand and said, "Barter's being distracting, and weird."

"Barter thinks it's time for the class to do different work, because this work is bad and doesn't teach us enough. Right Ms. Yano?"

The teacher's agape mouth and puzzled visage said it all. It was rare she found herself intellectually ambushed, because most her days were spent arguing with grade-schoolers.

"Right," Barter brazenly continued, "I think—"

"Barter!" Ms. Yano sternly squeaked. "Get off your desk this instant!"

"Okay." Barter hopped down and asked, "So what kinda different work ya wanna do, Ms. Yano?"

A stretched-thin Ms. Yano groaned into her hand for a second. "Just—please sit down and do your work."

Barter's face crumpled in offense of her suggestion. He stood up and strongly stated, "Barter knows you're only saying

that so you don't get in trouble."

The teacher flustered right over the line. "That's it, you sit down this instant or I'll send you to the office."

"Perfect!" Barter happily shouted. "I can fix this by talking to him so you won't be sad or get in trouble." Barter zipped out of the room before another word could be had.

Ms. Yano sat on the edge of her desk and tossed her arms up in defeat. Stuck between belittling bosses and brazen students storming out with righteous intention, Ms. Yano was forced to ask a buncha kids as lost as she was, "What just happened?!"



Principal Procrustean raised a brow at the waving student dressed like an action movie star. He looked at Mira the maroon dressed receptionist for reasoning, but she just shrugged underneath her long, salon-saturated blond locks. With reluctance, he waved him in.

Barter sat down with intent.

As insisted by his adulthood, the Principal had to ask, "What are you wearing young man?"

Barter smiled. "Good clothes."

"Should've worked on that uniform policy more," he grumbled to himself. "Anyways, what seems to be the problem?"

Barter replied, "The school."

The principal scoffed in offense. "Excuse me?"

"I can't, we still have a lot to talk about." Taking advantage of the perplexed

principal, he leapt into his purpose. "Barter believes the school needs less paperwork and more real things."

Principal Procrustean slowly replied, "I, don't, understand…"

"You know; real. Like not how the news is."

He'd zero patience for students and less for autistic students. "I want you to go back to your classroom and do your work before I call your mother. The school is just fine."

"No it's not," Barter calmly disagreed.

"Young man, I've no time for this nonsense."

"Barter thought school was here to make us all smarter?"

"What? Of course it is, but—"

"Then why does it teach us paperwork and not real stuff?"

The Principal growled, "The real stuff is *on* the paperwork…"

"Barter thinks building a house would be more real than math and monotony; did I say that word right?"

Principal Procrustean's face reddened as he snagged up his phone. "I'm calling your mother."

"That seems childish," Barter blissfully countered.

His jaw dropped as the dial tone hummed in his ear. He slammed the phone down! "If you don't go back to your class right now, I'm going to have you suspended."

"But…Barter's never been suspended?"

"Then I suggest you go back to class…"

Barter's chin curiously wrinkled. "Is it money?"

The principal massaged his forehead in

exhausted frustration. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Does the school give kids bad school work because it can't afford the good kind?"

His lip quivered with rage. "Go back to your room," he hissed through his teeth.

"*Oh*, Barter's made you really mad. He's sorry and he'll go back to his classroom, but please talk to him later so he can make the school a better place like you try to do."

Principal Procrustean felt a slap of humility subdue his pomposity as Barter walked away. A duel of different thoughts tilted his head. "Okay," he meekly mumbled in reply; Barter long gone though. For now, everything seemed to halt for the principal with way too much on his state-funded plate to contemplate his personal peace of mind.



Barter quietly did his work, trying to see the good in why paperwork-Beth would ever care about how many feet she walked or how long it took her; there seemed no point, as long as she got where she was going in the first place. He gasped as the bell for lunch rang. "YEAH!" Barter uncharacteristically shouted. "It's lunch everyone!" He again zipped out the door.

Ms. Yano giggled and shook her head. "What has gotten into that boy?"

An eager Esmerelda suggested, "Maybe he has A.D.H.D.?

Ms. Yano smiled. "Oh Esmerelda, every person on the face of the planet is born with A.D.H.D.; technically that is."



Barter sat patiently at an empty table, no tray of prison quality cafeteria food in hand.

Ms. Yano made her way over to her suddenly outgoing student. She sat down with her tray of portion-separated edible things. "Are you not having lunch Barter?"

"Oh he definitely is." He smiled big and wide, impatiently twiddling his fingers.

Just then, the owner of Goomba's Pizza, and a small entourage of his family, rolled carts into the cafeteria with stacks of you know what. "Did somebody order some pizza!?"

Silence gripped the cafeteria for a few seconds. An explosion of cheers roared out moments later as kids abandoned their trays of supposed food and prepackaged lunches from over-worked parents.

The pizza parlor owner made his way up to Barter with a special box just for him. "And for the young man with the funds"—he dropped the heavy box and whipped open the cheese-mounded monstrosity of bread drowned in mozzarella—"I used three pounds of cheese to make this."

Barters eyes glowed at the most beautiful pizza he'd ever seen. "*Oooooooh, cheese…*"

Ms. Yano pointed at the pizza, then at the owner, then asked the cheese-hypnotized child, "Barter, did you do this?"

"Nope," he replied as a rope of mozzarella followed after his brazenly retrieved slice.

The owner laughed. "Don't be modest, tell the pretty teacher the truth now."

"Atually," Barter said with a half-full mouth of pizza, "Is my Gandpa."

The owner nodded as if the universe once again made sense. "Well, tell him I said thank you very much. And you, young man, you can call me Luigi. If you or your Grandpa are ever hungry, just swing by and I'll drop ya both a slice on the house." He patted the pizza-perplexed Barter on the head. "And you ma'am?"

"Me?" Ms. Yano squeaked.

Luigi held a marinara-scented hand out to her; of which she daintily took, per his honest grin. "It was a pleasure meeting such a lovely woman. I hope you'll come down for a free slice sometime too…"

The very single teacher blushed along with her throat clearing. "Um-yeah, sure-okay, I like pizza okay-yeah, sure…" Because even teachers can have trouble with articulation.

Luigi smiled wider at her before he went off to continue his day of making delicious food.

Ms. Yano gave the afternoon the kinda light-hearted sigh she hadn't in a long while. She dropped a slice of pizza over her sad tray, picking off sauce-painted chunks of cheese. Ms. Yano humbly realized that the most interesting guy she'd had to talk to at lunch in years was an 8 year old with Asperger's. Thankfully, she was okay with it considering the potential pizza perk of passion. "So, how'd your talk with the Principal go Barter?"

A sudden seriousness gripped his face as he sat down the pizza. Barter swallowed his bite as he boldly replied, "Real problems take more than pizza to fix…"

DAY 6

Real problems can't be fixed with pizza

Daria had grimaced in the rear view mirror the whole way to school; her failure to convince Barter to change his cleverly washed clothes from yesterday irking her.

"Bye mom," he preemptively said before he hopped out.

"Barter-wait." She sighed at his wonderfully innocent wide eyes and the newfound enthuse for life that filled those eyes. "Oh-never-mind, just have a wonderful day at school sweetie."

"Thanks mom, Barter hopes you have the best work ever." He popped out of the vehicle like popcorn and immediately searched for Goth Windy… However, there was no sign of her and it was time to get to class. "*Hmm*, if Barter were an angsty teenager girl where would he be?" He slapped his forehead with a, "Duh. He'd be hiding outside smoking cigarettes and not doing school stuff like all these people." He found his way out by the portable classrooms. Barter followed the awful burning smell to Windella and a similarly dressed group of unhappy young ladies.

"Goth Windy!" Barter excitedly blurted. "Barter found you!"

The girls all breathed a sigh of relief when they realized he wasn't a teacher.

Windy harped, "Jesus Christ butt-burger. You scared me."

The chubby girl with black lipstick nasally scoffed, "Is he like—that weird kid you babysit?"

Windy rolled her eyes. "No Mandy, he's my Rabbi. Of course he's that weird kid I babysit."

Barter boldly, and in forced first-person, stated, "I need your help, Goth Windy."

Windella reluctantly sighed. "*Nope*. Can't you see I'm busy butt-burger?"

"No, no he can't." Barter pulled out a hundred dollar bill. "But what if Barter gives you this to help him ditch school and go on an epic adventure?"

Windy snagged the bill and replied, "Done." Secretly, she kinda wanted to help the kid anyways; the money just gave her a convenient and financially secure excuse.

"*What?*" Mandy whined inside her undersized outfit with a bang-full hair flick or two of her bleach-burnt mop. "You're just gonna ditch us?"

Windella diffused any further ridicule from her lesser minions. "Oh my god Mandy! What am I your babysitter too?!"

"Whatever…" Mandy's round face soured at Windy's tasteless hand gesture.

Barter inquired, "Isn't that finger the same as a bad word, Goth Windy?"

She smiled as she walked them off into the unknown. "It is, and I love it. So what's the plan weirdo? We gonna score some green buds, eat ice cream, and light some capitalist garbage cans on fire until the pigs search for us?"

"*Ummmm*—Barter doesn't know what most of those things are…"

"Never mind." She ruffled up his hair.

"So tell me what kinda trouble we're up to."

"Oh-right-yeah, what was it… Right! Barter needs help getting to Coriander City Hall."

Windy's enthuse dipped. "You mean that place with all the yuppie suits? Why?"

"Well——"

"Wait-I-know. We're gonna vandalize the bathrooms there, right-huh?"

Barter raised an eyebrow at her. "Why does Goth Windy wanna break everything?"

She shrugged. "I dunno, what's the harm in breaking something that's already broken in a buncha other ways?"

Barter felt like he should've had a better answer than the one he gave for that, but he didn't. "That makes sense. Okay, we can do vandalism, but first Barter needs to talk to the mayor."

She wrote that one off without a second thought. "Whatever-butt-burger, as long as I get to draw penises on a wall or set a garbage can on fire."

Barter stopped and glanced around with a confused grin. "Wait, how'd we sneak out of school so easy?"

Windy laughed. "Dude, all you gotta do is walk out. No one can really stop you, freedom yo."



Windy dramatically flopped down on a small patch of grass in front of the big office building. "*Oh my god*. Walking *sucks*."

"Come on Goth Windy, Barter has to hurry. The news androids said Mayor Mark Michaelson would be at City Hall at noon today."

Still sprawled on the grass, she groaned, "*Who cares*. We've been walking for like an hour."

"Barter!" Dusky hollered out the window, pulling up in his puce and orange muddled van from a different era. He hopped out and gave his son a big hippy-hued hug. "What're you doin downtown kid? Hey, if you stand with me while I fly a sign we'll make a butt-load of money."

Windy protectively pulled Barter away from the man. "Stay away from him, ya chomo."

Dusky smirked as he pointed at Windy. "Who's your cute friend kid?"

Windy poignantly replied, "Ew."

"She's Barter's sidekick, Goth Windy"—he turned to Windy—"And he's Barter's dad, Dusky."

Dusky winked at Windella. "Hey there."

"Double ew." Windy whispered to Barter, "That's the guy your mom was screaming at the other day?"

"Yup."

"You sure he's your dad?"

"Barter's pretty sure."

Windy grimaced at the scruffy vagabond. "I dunno, I think I saw that dude on To Catch a Predator or somethin…"

Barter honestly asked, "Is that about fish?"

"No it's—never mind. He keeps creepily smiling at me."

Dusky griped, "Ya know I can hear you guys…" His mind flipped right back to flying, but not the cool kind so much as the cardboard sign kind. "So what's up kid? Ya wanna hang out and make some cash?"

Barter scratched his chin. "Hang out

yes, cash no. But Barter has to get to City Hall before the mayor leaves. And walking takes too long."

Dusky chuckled, "Okay-whatever…" His stoned eyes lit up as he motioned at his vehicle. "Oh, dude, I gotta van. I can totally give you guys a ride."

Windy sarcastically grumbled, "Oh-yeah-look at that, an ugly old windowless van. Awesome…" She grabbed Barter's shoulder and hissed, "I swear if I end up on an Amber Alert I'm gonna kick your little butt."

Barter had no idea who Amber was or why being alerted by her was so offensive.

And so, the young people hopped into the van. Not a sentence that usually ends well or isn't in a police report, but our brave protagonist doesn't care about stereotypes; mostly because he doesn't know what they are, but still.

Windy sat down and spat, "Your van smells like 60's scented regret."

Dusky sarcastically laughed. "Yeah, I bet your mom does too."

She gasped in offense. "What—ever, like my mom would talk to you."

"Wait"—a huge smirked inched over Dusky's scruffy face—"Is your mom Kara?"

Windy's jaw dropped. "What the!? How do you!? No-no-don't tell me…"

Dusky told her. "Your mom and I had some good times—"

"Ew! Shut up!" Windy covered her ears.

Dusky spoke a bit louder. "I remember this one time we went skinny dipping—"

Barter politely interrupted, "Can we please drive and shout at each other? Barter's kinda on a mission to change the world."

Dusky patted him on the head. "For sure little visionary. Let's roll!"

The van cranked on like an old farm tractor on a cold morning.

Dusky turned the radio up.

With some Jesus of Suburbia by Green Day blaring out of the windows, they sped off to their destinies; or at the very least vandalizing a public restroom.



The ticket printer whirred as she slapped yet another infraction upon a windshield. Despite the legal justification of her job, at the end of the day she knew that making people pay fifty bucks for parking a little too long was a dick move. What this parking enforcement officer hadn't expected, was a boy named Barter and his duo of offbeat parental guardians. Her eyebrow's flipped in opposite directions as the sketchy van skid to a stop in front of City Hall.

Windy jumped out and screeched, "You drive like a crack head!"

"*Correction*," Dusky sang, "Crack heads drive like me."

Windy squawked, "How is that any different?!"

Barter laughed. "It was like GTA, but a van and no guns."

"Sir!" The parking officer asserted. "You can't park there, sir!"

Dusky rolled his eyes and grumbled, "Crap, it's the parkin pigs."

Thankfully, the 8 year old was on it. "Can Barter's dad's van park here for some money?"

The officer looked down at the boy. "Uh, did you just speak in third person kid?"

"Don't worry," Windy assured as she backed him up, "He does that all the time. He's just wanna those fourth wall breakin kinda kids, ya know?"

"No I don't," the parking enforcer stoutly replied. "Whatever walls ya'll are breakin, you're gonna have ta do it in a different parking spot."

"No prob," Dusky insisted. "You two head in and I'll park in an alley or somethin."

The officer scoffed at that. "Sir, you can't park in alleyways."

Dusky smiled. "Sure I can, people do way worse than park in those things ya know."

"That doesn't—"

"You're right ma'am," Dusky charismatically chirped as he hopped in the driver seat. "It doesn't make sense not to park there and block people from doin criminal activities."

"That's not what I—"

"Thanks parking cop lady," Barter said as he and Windella were already heading up the stairs.

The officer tiredly, and rightfully so, sighed. "Hell with it, I hate my job anyways." She jabbed at the carpel-tunnel causing ticket machine and grumbled, "I wouldn't hate it so damn much if I could talk ta people instead of helping the city rip them off…"

Windy had to ask the kid with big ideas, "So you're serious about talking to the Mayor?"

"Yup."

"Okay, but I dunno if he's gonna talk to a kid… You know, cause he's the Mayor…"

"Barter has his ways of making people talk."

She laughed. "You sound like a mobster."

"Lobster?"

"No, mobster. Much cooler, but less edible."

City Hall was packed with media crews and those of suit-wearing wealth or simple stereotyped standing.

Windy double checked that she'd left her knife at home as they got into the security line. "Good thing I didn't plan on shanking anyone today, huh Barter?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

The tired-eyed bear of a man waved them through the metal detector.

It beeped on Windy. "*Oh come on*."

The man sighed. "Please remove all metal objects, ma'am."

She took off the couple costume rings she'd on and confidently strolled through.

It beeped again.

The man slumped over to her with a security wand. And waved it up and down a few times. His brow skewed as it beeped around her crotch.

Windy waved the man closer with a shy finger.

He reluctantly leaned in. His eyes widened as she whispered in his ear. He uncomfortably cleared his throat. "Are you even old enough to get a-no don't tell me, just go…" He still wanted to know, but knew asking was a good way to get fired.

Barter quietly inquired, "What'd you tell him?"

Windy giggled. "I'll tell you when you're older. Come on, let's go harass some racist old politicians."

They easily followed the constant drove of media in and out of the main conference hall.

Barter frowned in annoyance as security people guided them to public seating way at the back. He sat down with a huff. "Barter thinks this is sep-seperation-tism, and it sucks."

"Well"—she shrugged—"What'd you expect, front row seats? Nobody gives a crap about who we are."

"Why? Barter's people too."

"No," Windy disagreed, "You're poor people. And poor people don't matter as much as rich people, because everything is run by rich people. It's like a club you can never afford to be in, because they want only them in it." Even she was a little shocked she'd explained it like that, not realizing Barter was beginning to rub off on her.

Barter's internal brain-gears creaked and cranked with defiant creativity. "Is that really how it is?"

"For the most part, yeah. I mean, they make it look like they care about poor people so they can get votes and stuff. But in the end, if they really cared about people, they'd spend less time talking about helping and more time actually doing it."

"Barter understands equality from Roots on TV. He thinks black people would all wanna leave after that—"

"There's the mayor."

Barter jumped up and stared down at the

speck of a man standing at the bigger podium.

"Hello Coriander, and it's a pleasure to be here," Mayor Mark Michaelson said into the mic, blinding-white smile and navy-blue power-suit the only thing viewable from the nose-bleed section. "First, I'd like to address the city tax reform. I'm proud to say we've come up with a plan that keeps taxes unchanged with only minor cuts to public works programs."

"Goth Windy? Barter thinks that didn't sound good, is Barter right?"

She nodded. "Whenever you're part of what a politician is sayin they're gonna do, like the word public, it's bad. Totally just like manipulation and crap."

Mayor Michaelson continued to speak over the silent jeers, his benevolent brown eyes pulling in their attentions. "Despite these miniscule sacrifices, the city will persevere. I can assure that I am doing everything to—"

"Really!?" Diana Folknor boldly interrupted, her curly burgundy hair bobbing just atop her yellow pant suit. "So you're saying we're losing more to keep the same? That doesn't sound the same at all, Mr. Mayor."

Michaelson kept the socially appealing smile upon his humbly-aged visage as he replied, "Please Ms. Folknor, I'll take questions in just a moment."

The overeager reporter crossed her arms and waited.

"Thank you, now as I was saying. As Mayor I know these small cuts will affect many of us, but we must not let it separate us. Together we can get Coriander's economy

booming again. I've taken the liberty of allocating funds towards the restoration of our city's economy via tourism and rebuilding Old-Town Street back into the business capital it once was."

Sycophants and ill-informed followers clapped and nodded approvingly.

"Thank you, thank you," the Mayor humbly said as he sucked up the ego-insisting validation. "I'll go ahead and take some brief questions from our news affiliates before moving on to other matters."

Diana Folknor tossed up her hand and said, "Same question as before, Mr. Michaelson."

The Mayor took a calming breath before answering. "I understand you're always looking for some drama, Ms. Folknor, but you can't build anything without sacrifice. And what I'm trying to do is build a future for Coriander."

As loud as he could, Barter screamed, "IS THAT A LIE?"

Windy grabbed him and slapped a palm over his mouth, but it was way too late.

Thousands of eyes turned back to the oddly dressed young man and his gothic garbed friend.

Mayor Michaelson chuckled. "Young man, I'm afraid this is a time for others to talk. I'll do my best to——"

"Answer the kid," Ms. Folknor insisted simply to stir the shit.

The Mayor's eye twitched once in annoyance. "Okay, then no. I am not lying. I care about this city's future. Anyways——"

Barter asked-yelled, "WOULD YOU DO ANYTHING FOR IT!?"

Windy dropped her head in failure, wishing she'd taped his mouth shut before they came in.

One reporter said, "Bring that young inquirer down here with us!"

Other reporters agreed, because kids got good ratings.

The Mayor smiled and waved Barter on down, utterly unaware of what he was putting upon himself.

Windy wheezed through a nervous smile as she followed Barter, awkwardly waving. She hissed in his ear, "We're elbow deep in bad life choice, butt-burger."

"It's okay Goth Windy, Barter's got this."

Mayor Michaelson began with some patronizing. "Tell us how old you are young man."

Barter shook his head. "That doesn't matter. Would you do anything for this city?"

"*Of course*," the Mayor beamed. "As a matter of fact, I've already donated a lot of money to local outreach programs as well as schools."

Barter simply asked, "Do you own the land and buildings for all of those?"

Mayor Mark's jaw drop ever-so-slightly at the unexpectedly insightful question. His brow skewed to the boy's calm stare. "Well, as a respected entrepreneur I have many different areas of investment."

Barter grimaced. "Was that a yes?"

"How bout we give others a chance to talk," the Mayor seamlessly deflected.

Every available hand in the entire hall rose for the first time in history, a shuddering shuffle shifting the air for a

second.

Mayor Mark gulped. He pointed at a harmless looking elderly African American woman and projected, "You there ma'am, yes?"

She slowly rose from her seat. Her nostrils flared as she harped, "Now you stop bein an ass and answer that young man's question properly."

Waves of nods rolled about the additional laughter.

A well-placed advisor zipped out of the backdrop and whispered nothing of significance in the Mayor's ear.

Mayor Mark Michaelson equipped a look of professionally rehearsed dismay. "Forgive me everyone, but I'm afraid an important matter requires my immediate attention."

The crowd buzzed with annoyance.

Less than calmly, Barter screamed, "Is it more important than us!?"

Mark froze mid-step. His neck tightened as he turned back around and seriously said, "Young man, everything I do is for the people of this city."

Barter didn't skip a beat as he said, "Than could you please let teachers at my school stop teaching Ready-Core?"

The press hopped to the mention of the program aided by one of the Mayor's very sub-committees.

The hardened politician aptly explained, "Ready-Core is the most efficient way of teaching the youth of Coriander the skills they need to become productive members of our city."

Barter just rapped away with a wide-eyed Windella watching on. "But what if he wants to be something different than what you want him to be?"

The sudden third person threw Mark off a little. "What?"

Barter was not thrown off. "What if kids wanna be something different than what Ready-Core wants them to be?"

Mayor Michaelson began to meander on the thought that he was just having a weird nightmare. "Well, there are plenty of other programs at our schools; like sports and such."

Barter shook his head to that, sheer willpower keeping the third person off of his tongue. "If most of what we do is Ready-Core, than we're not really doing other things. It's like how too much ketchup on French fries is just eating ketchup."

Mark really wished this was a nightmare. With his political advisor wildly waving from the hidden sidelines for him to flee and a child berating him like a purposefully placed political pop-quiz, he let his ego take the wheel and decided to argue with a child. "Young man, I don't think you understand the amount of money it takes to run these 'fun' programs you want more of."

"My name is Barter. And Barter knows you don't have to pay for something if the person who owns it just lets the people have it instead."



Camera man Carter and intern Anthony were heaving and huffing with laughter as it rounded the end of an all-out boss insulting fest. The two of them were wise enough to know that 99% of the mayoral public announcements were a waste of time. However,

they were unlucky enough for this day to be the exception.

A fellow news flunky with a bigger conscious than either of theirs popped out of the side door. He waved them down. "Hey idiots! Just thought any news affiliates would wanna know some little kids ripping the Mayor a new one."

They both stared at one another for a second while the other guy ran back inside to do his job. After a moment of frantic fumbling, they ran inside as well. A few maintenance hallways and they emerged into the thicket of the entire mess.

Mayor Michaelson sternly explained, "We cannot live in a society where everyone is just giving away everything for free."

Barter angrily huffed, "That is *not* what Barter said, Mr. Mayor. He said just the things that make people better, like hospitals and schools."

Mark condescendingly retort, "Those things cost money to run, but a child, like yourself, doesn't understand that yet."

"Barter understands," Goth Windy surprisingly said. "He understands things in a different way, like you need to do."

Barter widely smiled as he said, "Goth Windy is right, he understands that the only reason things cost too much money is because the people making them want more money than they need."

Mark was long done with this. "I'm sorry you can't understand young man, but you can't ask people to just give away their fortunes for nothing."

The 8 year old stood strong in the face of stale democracy, reporters chattering with excitement as they recorded every

unusual second. He'd also done away with the first person pandering, devoting his brain power to a greater purpose. "Barter knows that leadership is a sacrifice. Do you sacrifice for being the Mayor or make money from it?"

Mark coldly said, "We're done here." He turned his back and walked away from the moment, as if the people within it nothing at all and the spectacle made meaningless.

However, Diana Folknor made a living off of spectacles. She loudly queried, "Do you really expect upcoming voters to approve of a reelection candidate that can't answer a child's simple question!?"

Mark glared at his political advisor first, the high-paid man holding up a halting palm as he gestured for him to answer with the other. He then turned a friendly smile back around to Diana, but he wasn't gonna give her what she wanted that easily. "Really, Ms. Folknor? Do you truly think it more important that your Mayor waste time with a truant child and his delinquent sister rather than a pressing matter that could affect our city?"

Diana was a little disappointed in herself, she should've seen his classic redirection of questioning crap coming a mile away. "No," she droned, "Our city as a whole comes first."

Thankfully, Barter dropped his words upon the tail of hers and the Mayor's opening mouth. "None of that answers Barter's question-and wouldn't it take less time just to answer it and then do city things?"

A wave of light laughter limped its way around the press and the politically

participating people of Coriander city.

Mayor Michaelson was about ready to fire his advisor as the man flip-flopped to waving him on again. With his ego developing a bruise, he had to get the last word in. "Listen kid—"

Windella crassly interjected, "His name is Barter."

"Listen, Barter, I truly"—he did not, quite the opposite actually—"*Appreciate*, your outgoing interest in politics. However, I don't have the time to explain the complicities of it right now. We have plenty of internships for aspiring youth like yourself; I strongly suggest you look into them."

Barter had been talked down to by adults enough times to make him a pro by this point in his life. And even with the Mayor making a swift leave, he already knew what he was gonna say, because it was what he'd wanted to say since he started talking to this villainous raisin of a man. "Barter's mom says that when people don't answer it's because answering will make them look bad. She also says that it's the same as lying-and he thinks mayors shouldn't lie. Maybe Barter should be Mayor instead."

The press explode into a chatter as the Mayor's pace quickened. As soon as he was out of the public's sight, he grabbed his advisor by the collar and growled, "You're fired."

Before Windy or Barter could process what they'd done, they were swarmed by the press. A hubbub of questions inaudibly cut across the air as the two froze like deer in headlights.

A familiar redheaded reporter literally

pushed a few men out of the way, kneeled down in front of Barter, and calmly queried, "How about an interview, Mr. Barter?"

DAY 7
Homeostasis

The night was well over and rolling into the early a.m.'s with an extra half-moon hue.

"*Ugh*," Daria droned as she tiredly jangled her keys up to the door. She gave one more displeased glance back at Dusky's disgusting van. "Stupid dumb bastard piece a…" She grumbled as she clomped inside her house, angrily locking the door behind her. Daria went right to the kitchen and abusively unloaded all of her work crap on the table. She proceeded with her destressing as she grabbed a bottle of coconut rum from her secret stash and the first bottle of fruit juice she saw in the fridge.

The empty couch in the living room called her name as it often did after a long day of keeping someone else rich for a paycheck.

Daria dropped down hard upon the well-used cushions and flipped on the TV. It took her a few double-fisting drinks before she realized it wasn't on cartoons like usual.

"And on today's pre-morning re-cap, we go to Coriander city—"

Daria griped, "What idiot was watching the *news*? If I wanted to listen to fake people I'd just go back to work." She poked around the cushions for the remote.

"Mayor Michaelson was taken off his high horse when a young man named Barter Davidson-Garcia—"

"Fucking what?!" Daria quacked as she choked on coconut rum.

"That brave young man had this to say:" Barter's smiling face popped up on the TV with a waving Windella behind him.

Daria's face strung out with shock as she watched her son speaking on a national television channel.

"Barter noticed that his teachers and classmates were sad because of Ready-Core, so he came here to make it better for everyone."

Windy bombed the back of the interview with a swift, **"Vote Barter for Mayor!"**

A familiar female reporter asked the beaming Barter, **"And did you?"**

"No, but Barter's not done yet." He looked right into the camera. **"If you're a really smart teacher person, please come to Oliver Middle School and help us."**

Both bottles 'plunked' to the floor as a dazed Daria just sat there for a moment. "Shit," she sang to herself in surreal disbelief. Daria quickly picked up the spilling bottles.

"Well," the heavily caffeinated newsman chuckled, **"I can't wait to see what he does next. In other news, migrating ducks are——"**

"Ducks!?" Daria squalled at the TV. "Who cares about fucking ducks!" She leapt up and shook the TV. "Show me Barter again!"

"Dude," a bed-headed Windella droned as she sat up from a pile of blankets on the recliner, "Why're ya shoutin mama-D?"

"Windella? What're you still doing here? No scratch that shit. Why are you on TV with my son!?"

Windy yawned first. "Yeah, I was gonna tell you about that. That's why I'm still

here, but I fell asleep…"

"Windella?!"

"Yes?"

Daria furiously motioned at the TV.

"Oh-right, *Um…*" She snort-chuckled. "Wow, it sounds crazy in my head, but here it goes. I think Barter is, like, one of those retard-geniuses, like the piano playin Asian kids. But only with-like people-talking stuff, instead of pianos or violins or whatever."

Daria's head was about to pop. "What the *fuck* are you talking about?! Windella?!"

Windy decided to explain it in a way that was most beneficial to herself, since she couldn't remember what she'd planned on saying anyways. "Oh, um—Barter kinda ditched school and I saw him doing that, so *I* tagged along to *protect* him. Also, Dusky gave us a ride to City Hall and I illegally drove his van back here because he was arrested for peeing or parking in an alleyway? One of those, I dunno."

Daria groaned, "*Wonderful…*" She flopped her butt back onto the couch. "*God* I hope this is some screwed up dream…"

"Sorry mama-D," Windy yawned as she stretched out, "But it aint."

Daria just sat back with a blank stare. "Windella?"

"Yeah mama-D?"

"I think I'm just gonna just go to sleep, because I can't process any of that…"

Windy yawned, "That's a good idea," as she curled back up upon the plush recliner.

Daria wouldn't know why until her brain had some good old fashioned rest, but she grinned…



Daria snore-gasped awake as she squinted around the sunlit living room. "Brtr?" She not so successfully said. Daria shook it off. "Barter? You up?"

"He's outside," Windy answered as she sat a plate of bacon and eggs in front of her. She then whispered, "Don't worry, I re-stashed your special after-work-juice for ya before Barter could see it."

"Windella? What're you still doing here?"

Windy grin-shrugged. "Just thought I'd help get Barter ready for school for you and make breakfast; you looked a little burnt out last night. Also, I think my mom's smoking meth again for the millionth time, so I'd rather just be here instead…no charge of course."

Daria had to say the way she felt out loud, there simply was no other option. "Why does it feel like I'm in some sorta freaky alternate universe?"

Windella shrugged as she chomped down a bacon strip.

"Okay-hold the phone here. Since when do you cook or—anything else you're doing right now?!"

Windy laughed and smiled. "I-know-right? It's crazy, and just like your son taught me, I'm just choosing to be different."

Daria still felt lost, but her nose caught the scent of the garlic salt atop the over-easy eggs. She stabbed a strip into an egg and before she knew it she'd scooped up

an entire egg with the bacon. "That is really good."

"Thanks," Windy perkily squeaked with a rejuvenated sense of self. "My grandma taught me a little cooking years ago before she died."

Daria abruptly blurted, "Wait! No! Why is my son *teaching* you things?! No! How is my son on the news?!"

Windy just said, "Honestly, you'll just have to talk to Barter. I have no explanation for it. All I know is that 8 year old boy saved me from an abusive relationship one day and stood up to the Mayor for his teachers on another day."

Daria was still in complete disbelief. "There's no way, *my Barter*, did or—can't do any of that nonsense."

Windy sighed into a grin. "I don't know what else to tell ya mama-D. Ever since you told me his grandfather died and you needed me to babysit more, he's been a completely different kid. Honestly, he's kinda, like—adorably dashing. He even calls me his sidekick, Goth Windy."

Daria sighed down another crunchy bacon strip. "So he really did all that?"

Windy nodded as she crunched down bacon too.

"…He is so grounded…"



Barter's head dramatically flung back as another tedious tickle taunt his nose. "*Aw*," he hummed as it eased away and he went back to poking through Dusky's van. Barter lifted the big bag of odd, lumpy green herbs, its strong scent bleeding out. He

shrugged and tossed it to the back with the rest of the pile he'd made. His eyes lit up as he lifted a well-hidden, old puce purse.

Daria's tapping foot followed her words. "And just what do you think you're doing young man?"

Barter beamed with victory as held up his spoils of persistence to her.

Daria swallowed her past a little when she saw the bag she hadn't seen in centuries. She then grimaced at the words 'Bureaucratic BitchInfo' poorly painted upon it. The overworked and overwhelmed mother lost it a little, and rightfully so. "That is it! You are grounded-and no video games for a year!"

Barter's face bubble with puppy-dog-eyed adorable. He whined, "B-B-But Barter found the person info the police people he phone called said he needed to free his dad?"

"What?!"

"The police people told him that they can't let people go without iden-indents-*identifications*."

"I don't! Dusky is! You ditched school, and that is bad!"

Barter's shoulders somberly slumped. "Stop yelling at Barter and being a grump-person…"

"Go to your room!"

Barter's nostrils flared as he happily huffed away, somehow managing to look stern while carrying a purse.

Daria direly groaned to herself as she slid her palms over her face. She sat down on the edge of the open van and shook her head. "Well, that wasn't my most aspiring moment in parenting…" She tilted her tired-

eyed gaze to the side. "Is that a big bag of pot?"

Barter huffed and puffed through the front door, giving it a good slam shut!

Windy decided to follow the pouting child to his room, mostly to ask why he had a purse.

Barter fumblingly shoved the bedroom door open! "Stupid dumb mom! I'll just use money and buy a brain-doctor to fix your STUPID!" His eyes whipped to the window. "But first, Barter will run away and show mom she's stupid and wrong."

Windy giggled at him from the doorway. "As your sidekick, I'm obligated to tell you that those are both stupid ideas."

Barter's angry softened in a second as he let a chuckle slip.

"You'll feel different when you're not so pissed off. Also, why're you so pissed off?"

He gruffly sighed. "Because Barter's mom is acting like a yelling jerk person…"

Windella was thoroughly enjoying being the level-headed one for once in her life. "She's just a little scared, that's all."

"His mom is scared?"

"Of course, she came home last night and saw you on the news. Most parents who do that only do so cause their kid was chomo-napped."

"What's a chumbo-nap?"

Windy quickly got back on track. "Never mind. The point is, you're doing a lot of different and exciting things, and that can be scary to some people. Even I was a little scared at first."

Barter's face burst with love as he lunged his arms around her and hugged tight

for a few seconds. "You're the best sidekick ever, Goth Windy."

Windella blushed a little. "*Aww*, well aint you sweet."

"Barter was scared at first too…" He gasped with revelation. "It's totally Barter's fault for not being understanding… W*hoa*, it's like—adult feeling."

Windy's laughter escaped through her nose before she gave in and it blurted from the rest of her. "Sorry, didn't mean to laugh. But I think we need to get you a thesaurus, Barter."

"What's a the saurus?"

She smiled wide at her micro-hero with a limited vocabulary. "Don't worry about that, we'll get you a dictionary too."

"Okay," he chipperly agreed.

Windy finally asked, "So what's with the purse?"

He tossed it down on the bed. "Barter has to fix things for real this time…" Barter puffed up his chest and strolled towards his mother's gripes.

Windy side-stepped being a sidekick, because she just had to know what was in the comically named purse.

Barter stormed right up to his mother and lift a pair pursed lips and serious eyes to her. "Barter has to talk to you right now."

Daria sighed with exhaustion as she turned away from her angry tidying up. "Go to your room and get ready for school."

"Barter is ready for school…"

She grumbled, "Oh yeah, your little Karate outfit… Fine, what do you want?"

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed tight as he said, "Barter's sorry

if he scared you by being different."

Daria lifted him up into her arms and returned his hug. She sat him back down and sweetly said, "Just, please, no more crazy adult adventures."

Barter opened his mouth, shut it, cupped his chin in thought, and then opened that mouth again. "He can't do that."

"Excuse me?!" Daria croaked. She tossed up a stern parental-finger. "I am your mother, and you will do whatever I tell you to do."

He whined, "But you're supposed to tell Barter to be whatever he wants to be."

This time Daria's face made a series of thoughtful gestures with a wordless open mouth. "That's not—stop using my words against me."

"But they're your words, the only person they can be against is you."

"What?!" The mother's frustration outweighed her ability to listen. "That doesn't make sense Barter-now go to your room."

"What?!" the son's frustration bubbled over as well, but he'd learned how to turn off the proverbial burner. "The things you're saying are making Barter mad, but he understands why you're saying them."

Daria would've been thrown off of her feet if she'd been a cartoon character. So, like any confused person, she lashed out a little in search of someone to blame. "Why're you acting so weird? This is all because of your idiot father; did he give you anything weird?"

"*No mom*," he droned at her all too familiar hatred. "For the very-very last time ever, Barter's dad has never given him

adult drugs or drinks."

Daria scoffed. "That's it, I know this is all his doing and I'm having that hideous van towed."

"Why do you hate Barter's dad so much?"

Daria gladly answered that one. "Because he's a worthless druggie bum who's trying ta turn you into a loser like him."

Barter laughed and halted her phone-reaching hand. "Barter doesn't wanna be like dad. He only wants to be like Barter."

"Your dad's a bad influence and that's final, stop arguing about it."

"So Barter doesn't get an opinion like adults do?"

Daria simply said, "No you don't."

He grinned. "Barter thinks you're really mad at his dad and taking it out on him…"

"You wanna know why I'm mad?! I'm mad because you can't see that your father is just a piece of stoned crap. And he doesn't give a crap about us and will just steal my food and leave like he always does. That's what I'm mad about!"

Windy suddenly cleared her throat; once again a full blown sidekick. "Sorry to interrupt all the yelling. But you might wanna take a look inside Dusky's purse…"

Daria dropped a disgusted scoff in refusal. "I don't care what's inside his little druggie bag——"

Windy dumped the contents out onto the living room table, adding a flare of Barter influenced dramatic.

Daria scoffed at the tattered lump of poorly paperclip family court documents and other various papers. However, her eyes turned away from the familiar blob of

bureaucracy. She poked out the many baby pictures of Barter hiding underneath it.

He joined his mother, a smile growing upon his cheeks as beheld the mismatched assortment of Barter memorabilia his father had collected.

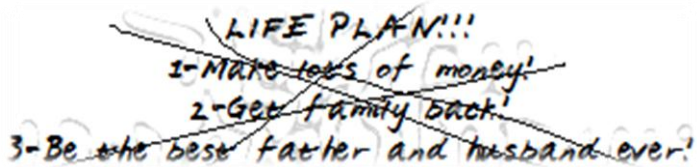
The pile of heartless paperwork was now pushed aside as the grinning faces of Dusky's small family sorted through his hopes. Unknown toy parts and tiny trinkets a toddler would amass spread about; even a few memorable candy wrappers were tied together.

Daria was dumfounded. "I don't understand, why would he…?"

Windy pulled a chubby envelope from the middle of the bureaucratic bundle. She held it out to her and explained, "You're gonna wanna take a good look at this…"

With Barter looming over the envelope, Daria opened it and an old, crumpled piece of lined paper popped up. She unraveled the old note that Dusky kept as a rough reminder of reality.

Barter gasped along with his mother as he read the semi-scratched out words:



The letter had created an emotional upheaval amongst them; as all three of them had a reason not to like this man.

Daria then pulled out the other newer papers and unfolded them. "…This is… No, Dusky couldn't—I mean he hates this kinda stuff…"

Barter's head spun as he tried to understand all the lawyer jibber-speak upon

the paper. "Ugh! Barter doesn't know what this stuff means!"

With a dumfounded Daria still panning the paperwork, Windy explained. "Your dad set up something called a Trust Account in your name. So that when you turn 18 you'd have some money to do whatever you want with."

Daria surreally huffed, "Yeah… That's exactly what this is…"

Barter's ever-clever brain bubbled with new cognitive concoctions and cranked with curiosity. "So adults don't really want money as much as they want to be important to someone else?"

Daria honestly still felt like she was in the Twilight Zone. "What-the-huh?!

Thankfully, Windy was getting her sidekick on today. "Yes. That's why they all bitch about it, but then turn around and tell you how *important* it is to have it and work jobs you hate just to get it. It's like one of those psyomological cycles of abuse things; ya know, where everyone thinks something is okay when it isn't."

"Windella!?" Daria furiously squawked. "You can't say those things to an 8 year old!"

"Why?" Barter and Goth Windy calmly asked in unison.

"Because—because-it's just gonna confuse him."

He adamantly shook his head. "Barter's not confused at all. He's learning all about psyclagy and how people feel and think so he can help everyone be happy. That's why Barter's here with you right now mom, so he can make you happy too."

Daria looked down into her son's honest

eyes and felt every frivolous fleck of frustration fall away. She spent most of her days feeling like a doormat from the rest of the world's moment-strangling ways. But her own son had made her feel more valuable and loved in three seconds than any hard-earned paycheck ever had. She said the only thing she could, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, because Barter's glad to help. Also, the clock says he's gonna be late for getting his dad out of police jail."

"Shit," Daria said as she realized the time.

"*Ooh*, Barter's mom used a bad word." Windy giggled.

"You're not going anywhere but school and I can use bad words if I want because I know how to use em."

Windella locked that tid-bit of motherly wisdom away for later.

Barter sternly stomped his foot. "Sorry mom, but Barter has to go help his dad right away so his dad can feel loved and protected like you do."

Not a refusing word, or any word, exited Daria's open mouth.

Sidekick Goth Windy tossed the tired mother a proverbial bone. "I-know-right, he keeps doin crap like that to me too. I'm telling ya, he's one of those dumb smart kids that plays piano."

"He plays piano too?!" Daria drummed in disbelief.

Windy shook her head. "Nope, so far it's just the smarty-pants, know-it-all talking stuff."

"Oh-good, because I cannot afford a piano on my crap pay."

Windy went on. "I know it seems weird doing what a dorky little kid tells you, but so far the results speak for themselves."

Daria curiously inquired with her suddenly astute babysitter, "So is that what's going on with the strange clothes?"

Windy nodded. "Yeah-I think that's part of the weirdo genius thing; I looked it up. Albert *Einstein* dressed in the same nerd clothes everyday too."

He grumbled at them, "Barter can still hear both you…"

Daria casually said, "Sorry honey, give us a sec. Windella, are you seriously saying that this is one of those things I'm supposed to, like, support as a parent?"

"Yeah."

"Shit."

"Stop saying bad words, mom."

"Sorry-honey. Really? Because arguing with the Mayor on the news and"—her tone somber in defeat as that first fact sunk in—"Doing all that other stuff is, yup, definitely something amazing…" She looked to her son, now smirking cause he'd stolen a piece of bacon from someone's plate, and smiled big N' wide. "Barter, you're amazing."

Barter, being exactly who he was, replied, "That's nice, but can we get Barter's dad out of jail before he gets shanked in the yard or becomes a bee-otch?"

Daria's brow guillotine at Windella. "No more prison sitcoms."

Goth Windy owned it like a true sidekick. "Yup, that's totally my bad. I really like watching muscly men do prison stuff to one another."

Daria nodded with understanding.

DAY 7
Homeostasis Too

Daria grumbled and grunted all the way from the parking lot into the station. She knew it was somehow her fault for being stuck with the solo venture of getting her ex out of jail; ironic, because she was usually the one putting him there. Daria hated the smell of police stations, thinking, **"Seriously, why doesn't somebody light a scented candle or something**…" She dawned the smile she used to greet customers as she walked up to plastic paned reception desk; like a squared gerbil-ball for financially unfortunate humans.

The caffeinated and already exacerbated woman behind the counter's chocolate cheeks were stuck in a grimace. She less than enthusiastically asked, "How can I help you?"

"Hi, I need to see about having a current detainee released."

The woman's hazel gaze shifted to the vulgarly named purse for a moment.

"Oh-this isn't mine," Daria defended, "It's the guy's I'm trying to help."

Her pessimistically arisen brow said it all. "Uh-huh, what's the name of the person you're trying to *help*?"

Daria did not appreciate the woman's tone, but, with enough to worry about as it was, she let it slide. "It's Dusky Davidson."

The woman tick and tap away on her keyboard for a moment, swiping her braided

black hair away from it every few seconds. She sighed and droned off what the computer told her. "It looks like he's here, but his identification wasn't validated within 24 hours and he's been put in for transfer to the county prison until it is. You'll have to go there."

"Hold on. If he's still here, can't I just give you the information so none of that has to happen?"

The woman impatiently droned, "*Ma'am*, you'll have to take care of this at the county prison."

Daria crowed, "But he's not even there right now?!"

"That is your problem, ma'am…"

Daria was not going to let that one slide, but thankfully a bit of Barter's different had smeared off on her. "I know it's none of my business, but are you okay?"

"Excuse me?" She tiredly replied.

Daria let the words waterfall from her mouth like she hadn't since she was a chatty teenager. "I mean, I know some lady trying to bail her ex out because her son was on the news is none of your concern, but you just seem *really* unhappy…"

For a moment the woman angrily scanned over Daria as if she were trying to scam her. Then she glanced around to see no one else in ear-shot. "Yeah-well that's because I am-and it's none of your damn business."

Daria raised a peaceful palm and lowered a humbled chin. "Sorry, I know it isn't. I was just hoping that if I helped you feel a little happier you'd help me with this mess my son talked me into."

But the tiniest fraction of the woman's anger slipped away, and it was more than

enough. "That's fair, but I'm not sure there's anything I can do from my end anyways."

"I understand. Well, maybe I could still help you?"

The woman looked confused. "Why?"

She thought of Barter as she shrugged and replied, "Why not?"

Like most people, the receptionist dismissed the help of a stranger. "That's nice, but I doubt *you* could help me."

Daria brushed off her insulting tone with ease, because having a kid best you on multiple occasions has humbling side-effects. "Try me."

The woman was taken back, and not in the good way. "Who do you think you are?! Coming in here and—who do you think you are?!"

Now Daria was the one wearing exacerbation. "I told you, I'm just trying to help my son's father because—well, it's complicated; we think he's an idiot-savant."

The troubled receptionist replied with a fitting, "What?"

Daria suddenly realized what it felt like to be Barter. Not because of everyone seeming confused around you, but because she saw the sad underneath and knew exactly what to say. "Listen, I'm sorry someone hurt you, but my mother used to tell me that we all have to try and be better than the pain other people cause us."

"That!" The woman loudly said with a hint of hostile. She then huffed out her anger and humbly hummed, "Well-that, that is some really good advice…"

Daria had to say it, because she knew her son wouldn't have. "Sorry for being

weird, this whole—being different thing is new to me."

"What're you preaching from a self-help book or something?"

Daria chuckled. "Nope, just following my son's example."

"He must be one Hell of a young man. Is he in college?"

Daria kept the honesty train going, ignoring that judgement-induced dash of dumb feeling we're all too familiar with. "Actually, he's 8."

The woman's face deadpan. "You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was," she laughed in reply. Daria cut the woman off before she could verbalize her self-serving disapproval. "Yes-I know it sounds bat-crap crazy, but the results speak for themselves."

The heartache having receptionist gave in to the plain unusual of it all, whilst keeping a foot in the door of denial. "Yeah-right, because an 8 year old is gonna be able to explain to me why every man I get in a relationship with treats me like shit."

Daria smirked. "No he isn't, but I might be able to."

The woman scoffed. "Why, because you're listening to an 8 year old child?"

"Yes," Daria promptly replied with crystal-clear confidence in her son.

Her face fumbled about for a second.

Daria saw the frustration growing in the woman as she simply struggled to grasp such a far-fielded concept. So she gave the woman the exact same advice she'd been telling herself recently. "Just find someone who treats you better than you treat yourself, and dump whatever sack of dicks is

making you miserable right now."

That one hit the spot as a squeaky gasp escaped her mouth. "I, um… I—I completely agree with that…" She sat back a little and gave Daria a friendly grin. "I'm-uh, my name's Gabriella; everyone calls me Gabby."

"Daria; people call me lots of things, but mostly Daria."

Gabriella leaned in closer to the plastic wall between them and asked, "You really think I should leave my fiancé?"

"How long have ya'll been together?"

Gabby gave that one an unrequited grin before answering. "2 and half years."

"When was the last time they did something romantic for you?"

She shrugged before defensively answering, "He always gets me something nice on our anniversary?"

"*Yeah*, no. Getting someone a present on the holidays doesn't make you a saint, and remembering an anniversary just means you know how ta use a calendar. When was the last time they did something nice for no reason?"

Gabby had to think unfortunately long about that one. "Well… Does doin the dishes count?"

"Not if they helped make em."

Like a moth to a porch light, she defended her inadequate lover. "Okay, things like romance and—exciting stuff like that aren't the most important thing in a relationship. What about stability and stuff?"

Daria was surprised she let the next sarcastic words slip out, but would be happy they had. "*Right*, because *stability* is what a woman's thinkin about while she's getting

stuffed like a cannoli."

Gabby choked a little on her own held back laughter. "You're crazy girl. You can't say stuff like that in public."

The quiet, politely distanced, and burly brick-haired biker waiting behind Daria said, "I'm okay with it."

Gabby dropped her head into her palms and griped, "You're so gonna get me fired Daria."

Daria didn't care one damn bit if that happened, as long as the woman she'd just met found true happiness because of it. "Dump the unappreciative baggage and live your life, Gabby. Because the only thing stability really gets you in the end is a predictable and easily scheduled life."

"Amen," the gruff-faced biker boldly agreed.

Gabby mouthed 'Oh my god!' taking a breath or two. For the first time in much longer than it ever should've been, Gabrielle thought about who she really wanted to be. And it wasn't a regretful receptionist with a romance-flaccid fiancé. "Fine"—she glanced at the clock—"My lunch is coming up soon enough. I'll just drive down to his work and…" She let the brave overrule her fears to find how she felt. "I'm gonna tell him it's over right there. Ha!" Gabby covered her mouth as she realized that 'Ha' was exactly how happy she felt about the idea of being single.

With his ironically deep voice, the biker cheered, "You go girl."

A massive smile stretched across Gabrielle's face as she realized, "So, what can I do for you, Daria?" The very idea of helping a stranger that'd breathed new life

into hers giving her a sense of purpose.

"Oh," Daria said in surprise. "Um, Dusky Davidson? I mean, is there any way you can release him to me?"

Gabby tapped at the keyboard with purpose as she inquired, "Do you have any of his identification?"

"Yes, all of it." Daria reached into the purse and pulled out a small stack of cards with a rubber band around them.

Gabby chuckled at it as she pulled it through the tiny paper slot in the plastic. She undid the rubber band and laid out the litany of poorly treated personal info. "That'll do." Gabby typed away as she fueled the information gathering monster that was the entire purpose of her job.

The biker gently cleared his throat behind Daria before whispering, "I just wanted to say, I think you're the total package when it comes to a woman."

Daria quirkily skipped around to the semi-toothless smile on his lightly scarred face. "Huh," she huffed with a curious thought or three about her son's sudden philosophy on life. "Well thank you. That is very kind of you to say, Mr.?"

"Spider."

Daria really wanted to ask if that was a family name, but she'd gone this far down Barter's rabbit hole and was enjoying the ride. "Daria, and don't you dare ask me out on date or anything. I got *way* too much going on for that nonsense right now."

"Yes ma'am, a raincheck it is."

Daria gave him a cheeky eye squint.

"Shit," Gabby suddenly cursed. "My bad, but it looks like all the stupid whatnots of this stupider system have already been set

in…"

Daria sighed. "So no luck, huh."

One side of Gabby's face grimaced. "Not necessarily, I can always run it up to my boss. *However*, that only happens when the person involved is famous or rich or something…"

"Well I'm none of those."

Gabby queried, "Didn't you say your son was on the news?"

Daria laughed, remembering how annoyed she first was to find that out. "Yeah, he's the kid that talked crap to the Mayor yesterday."

Gabby croaked, "He's that kid?! I—freaking—love that kid. Done watched like a million different YouTube videos of that kid already; even the stupid remix ones. So hold the phone on this, does that mean that this *Dusky* guy, your ex, is that kid's dad?"

Daria nodded, still trying to grasp the reality that her son was leaping towards minor-celebrity status.

Gabby beamed as she said, "Well that'll do it."



Goth Windy glanced down and smiled at Barter's hand in hers as they approached the last block before the school.

Barter's face buried in a small dictionary he'd finagled along the way.

"I can't believe you gave that old lady twenty bucks for that."

Barter grinned, his ears working just fine in spite of his eyes being busy. "She tried to give Barter the book for free, but that just means she's really nice." He

glanced at their hands. "Also, holding your hand makes Barter feel like he has a"—he gave the dictionary a swift glance— "Stupendous sister and a *stratospheric* sidekick."

"*Oh*, stop-it. You're gonna make me blush ya big kiss-ass." She let go of his sweaty little hand and gave him a hair tussle with it. "And that old lady was pretty chill. I mighta done the same."

"That's why Barter left her all his money with 2's."

"Wait… How much money did you leave that lady?"

"Why're they're so many people and vans at Barter's school?"

Windella drastically switched gears when she saw the media circus waiting ahead. "*Ye~ah*, how much you wanna bet that's for you…"

"Why would there be vans at school for Barter?"

Windy groan-sighed. "*Dude*, because you *publically* called the *Mayor* out on his shit yesterday."

"Oh yeah… Barter has no idea what to do about the vans…"

Windy clarified, "They're news reporter vans, like from yesterday."

Barter beamed up at Windella. "You really are the best sidekick for Barter."

"Yeah-yeah-yeah, you're adorable and junk, I know. Important question though, do *you* think we should bail hard on all that craziness and go get ice cream and candy? *Or*, should we go to *school* with all-that-stuff?"

"Barter really likes candy and ice cream."

"I know right," Windy squeaked, "Me too. So it's settled then——"

"*But*, this might be Barter's one chance to make the school better."

"Cool, I'll totally ditch alone then, bye."

Barter grabbed her hand before she could U-turn out of there. "But he can't do it without his sidekick…"

Windella pouted, "*O~h*-damn-you and your puppy-dog eyes you righteous little bastard."

"Goth Windy seems"—he glanced in the dictionary—"Sassy today."

She giggled. "Still on S's huh."

He nodded.

Windy turned back to the media masquerade. "As your sidekick, I advise we sneak in through the soccer field."

"Barter likes that idea. Looking at all of those people is giving him social-anxiety."

"Nice one."

"Thank you."



Barter waved goodbye to Windella as she waved back with a big smile. He popped into the classroom fashionably late once again. "Sorry Ms. Yano, Barter had to sneak past vans and now he's late again." Barter got himself situated and looked up, realizing that everyone was staring at him. "Um, good morning?"

Ms. Yano cleared the phlegm of disbelief from her throat, but still squeaked, "Barter?! What on earth are you doing here?!"

Barter looked as baffled as kid could look. "*Umm…* He's going to class?"

Ms. Yano shook her head with a big grin. "Barter-honey, there's a buncha *really* important people waiting to talk to you up front…"

Barter took a deep breath. "Oh, okay. Why?"

Ms. Yano let a single loud 'HA' slip out. "Excuse me. So…" She turned to her star student and said, "Esmerelda, you're in charge until I get back." Ms. Yano then walked up to Barter and held her hand out to him. "Come on, I walk you up front and you can ask them that personally."

He trustingly took the kind teacher's hand. "Barter knows what that word means now, he also knows what personalization means, and because it's like his clothes he now wears."

"That's wonderful," she chuckled as they made their way out into the hallway.

"Yup, Barter now has a dictionary to help with the dynastic different."

In Ms. Yano's 2 years teaching this peculiar young man with a fondness for third person, she'd never heard such confidence in his tone. She frankly informed him, "I've only heard rumors about what you said to our Mayor, but I'm proud of you."

A surprised Barter chirped, "You are?"

"Of course I am," she matter-of-factly sang. "You're my student and you've made a real difference in the real world. Most of adults can't even say we've done that."

Barter suddenly felt a glint of dizziness as a slideshow of the countless times Ms. Yano had said something wonderful to him strobed by.

Her grip tightened as she felt the child wobble a little. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Barter just realized that you've been doing for him what he just started doing for everyone because of his dead grandpa."

"Oh," was all Ms. Yano could muster at first. "I'm sorry about your grandpa, but I've never done *anything* like what you've done; I'm just a teacher." Then her student said something she'd never forget.

"Barter is never just anything, and neither is Ms. Yano. And he thinks you can do anything if you put your mind and heart into it, because that's what you've helped him believe."

It was the similar spiel she been giving kids year after year, and yet it wasn't. Every single word he'd said and even the way he'd said it sat solemnly inside of her. She hummed, "Oh, okay. Thank you." A familiar smile suddenly stole her attention as she nearly ran into it. "M-Mr. Luigi?"

"M-Ms. Yano?" Luigi nervously straightened the collar of his self-promoting T-shirt.

She didn't even realize she had a grin for a reason she'd yet to even explore. "Wh-What are you doing here?"

The honest pizza peddler rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. "Actually, I'm kinda lost…"

The 8 year old obviously asked, "Did you bring more pizza?"

Luigi chortled. "Yes and no."

They both gave him a curious squint.

"Sorry, let me explain. When I was here the other day I saw the slop these kids were eating and—well, I grew up in a big family

and learned that you're only as good as the food you stick in your belly and love you give. So, to make a long story short, I came down to try and see if I could set up some kinda food program for my restaurant to give these kids the good they need in their bellies."

Ms. Yano swiftly picked up her jaw, but couldn't push back her blush. "Mr. Luigi…I don't know what to say besides, that's wonderful."

He gently scooped up Ms. Yano's hand and shook it even gentler. "Please, call me Lewy."

"Okay, Lewy…"

Barter looked back and forth between the goo-goo eyed adults. Now this one was a little bit of a challenge to read, but thankfully his wasted hours of sitcom watching would pay off. "*Oh*, Barter gets it. You two are like Leonard and Penny, because Ms. Yano's prettier than you and you have romantic adult-interests in each other."

The both of them stammered and stuttered as they let their lengthy handshake go.

"Barter thinks you should both stop being nervous," he optimistically preached, because he was Barter, "And then he thinks you should talk about dating like you want to."

Luigi literally loved this kid's attitude, because he was also the kind of man that took the leap. "Theoretically speaking, if I were to ask you out on a date, also knowing that you're *way* out of my league, would you perhaps, maybe say yes, Ms. Yano?"

The middle school teacher adored his

use of the word theoretically. "I—I'm not big on dating."

"Oh," he dourly droned.

Ms. Yano swiftly squeaked, "*However*, theoretically, if a man promised me not to turn into a possessive psycho and accepted that my teaching career comes first, I—very much would say yes to a man like that…"

Luigi's face lit up like sunshine. "Y-You would?! Awesome, I mean, would you? Like to go out with me, under all of your terms, that is? And it doesn't have to be pizza."

Ms. Yano giggled. "I might have to get back to you about the dating thing, but I do really love pizza."

"Me too, well-obviously. Why else would I own a pizza place? I mean, I guess there's other boring business reasons. My family just likes Italian food, you know, because we are?"

For a fun switch, Barter played sidekick this time. He gave Luigi's shirt an attention-grabbing tug. "Barter thinks you should stop talking before it's too late to not sound dumb…"

"Right," he said to the boy with a thankful finger-point, "Good having my back kid."

"You are very welcome pizza man." Barter waved his teacher and her big-hearted admirer on as he walked ahead. "Come on you two, it's time to help Barter make some difference."

They shared a shrug and followed after the quick-footed kid with a cause.

Barter rounded the corner to the people-full office area.

Principal Procrustean's demeanor was far from its usual chipper as he and his

receptionist Mira did their best to subside the argumentative rabble. PTA, professors, and the purposeful alike asking far more than the procedural principal was willing to perpetuate.

Mira loudly harped, "Please people! I cannot do anything for anyone that doesn't have an appointment!"

That only further incited the rabbling and muted the Principal's verbal attempts to get things under control.

While his teacher and favorite pizza vendor took a step back, Barter puffed his chest out and strode towards the mess he'd made. With his hands perched on his hips like a posing superhero, he waited to be noticed a short distance away.

A silent psychologist was at the back of the rabbling with his arms impatiently crossed. His stern brown suit was the same shade as his turning gaze. The man's cheeks wrinkled with a grin when he saw the posing young man. Casually and quietly, the man with degrees and doctorates snuck away from his fellow big-headed fools.

Barter turned a glad grin to the approaching man and a held out hand to shake.

The man of the mind shook the smaller hand with a curious squint, made to feel as if he were greeting a much older acquaintance.

"Hi, my name is Barter. He's assuming you're here because of stuff he said?"

Though an esteemed professor of psychology and even a private practice owner, a child had ever-so-subtly unsettled his static reality. "Why yes, yes I am. I'm Dr. Lucian Lurgckwhilletk."

"It's nice to meet you, but is it okay if Barter can't say your last name? Because he can't."

For the first time in months, Lucian let a grin grace his cheeks and a chortle clamor his throat. "Yes, that is fine. Might I ask, what is your exact age?"

Because of the currently shocked silent Ms. Yano's teaching, he knew that one. "Barter is 8 years and 2 months old."

"Fascinating." His stern face began to light up, immediately asking the question he knew he should've waited to ask. "Tell me, what is your purpose in doing all this?"

Barter grinned with the steadily unsouring man. "Because if Barter doesn't, no one else will know they can too."

The brilliant and prestige-placid psychologist froze in place before the child with more brazen than he'd ever remembered having.

It wasn't seconds after one of the pissed off PTA members noticed the 8 year old cause of her woe and the rest of the crowd followed suit.

Barter took a good hop back towards his teacher and pizza vendor.

The first PTA vulture to notice waddled up to Barter like a shadowing ogre with obesity. "You've caused everyone a lot of trouble young man."

"Trouble?!" A balding man in a blue uniform jested. "This boy is the reason we're all here."

The PTA vulture harped, "He's the reason my daughter won't do her Ready-Core homework."

Another woman with an observatory outfit said, "Who cares. Let us real people

teach your kids about this universe; not some stupid program."

Yet another overbearing educational-terrorist on the PTA opened their mouth. "That *stupid program* is called *Ready-Core*, and it's helping our children *ready* for the future."

"Oh please," a younger professor with a goofy tie scoffed. "I looked over this Ready-Core plan and the only thing it's gonna prepare kids for is a career in merchandizing and mediocrity."

"Nonsense!" Another PTA polyp yelled.

The rabble quickly descended into inaudible arguing once again.

A confused Barter simply walked right past everyone and up to the displeased Principal, curiously turning heads along the way.

Principal Procrustean had his arms angrily crossed and his face sternly pursed.

The 8 year old source of all the trouble respectfully said, "Barter is sorry for all of this bothering you."

The Principal gave him a speculative brow-raise. "Well, that is nice of you young man, but it doesn't solve the problem at hand."

"You're right," Barter agreed. He turned to the half arguing, half curious crowd. With a voice crack included, he yelled, "EXCUSE ME EVERYONE!"

Heads turned, then dropped to the young man.

"Barter thanks all of you for coming to see him, but it's school time and that's time for learning things. So if you're here to teach things or help the school, he and the Principal can help you, but if you're

here to be angry you'll have to come back later when we're not busy learning."

Shocked silence enveloped the room with a dusting of disbelief.

A retired sociologist with too much time on his hands 'harked' nice and loud before blurting, "Well-I'm here to teach; I don't know about the rest of you?"

Lucian promptly stepped up beside Barter and announced, "I am here to teach as well, and I will gladly defend the decisions of this young man along with his brave Principal." Lucian knew the last thing being expressed upon Principal Procrustean's face was support, but he also knew how to wrangle a selfish schmuck into helping a good cause.

The Principal's open mouth was too slow on the draw as the PTA ogre barked, "*I! Will not* be told *what* to do by *a child!*"

The bald man in a blue uniform loudly cleared his throat as he crossed his arms and queried, "What if one engineer and room full of very smart people told you how wrong you are?"

The PTA posse went wide-eyed before the gang of professionals determined to make a difference, despite their differences.

"*Whell*," the PTA ogre huffed, "I have a right to my beliefs."

Lucian promptly replied, "Refusing to accept the possibility of being at fault isn't a belief; it's a pseudo form of narcissistic denial."

The PTA vultures flapped after their crap-causing leader as she heaved away spouting about meetings and rights; just as Dr. Lucian had said, denial.

Barter had no idea what any of that was about, but thankfully he'd been on his own

page for a long minute; he was just politely waiting. "Okay everyone! Barter, the Principal, and Ms. Yano are on a team that's gonna help move everyone to the right classes to teach really neat smart-people stuff that you smart people know."

"I am?!" Ms. Yano squeaked, while Principal Procrustean felt like he were in that peculiar nightmare he keeps having where the kids are in charge.

And Luigi just chortled to himself.

In spite of the utterly unscheduled educational escapade, a few open minds and one difference-making 8 year old had pulled off what most would've condemned. They managed to put every student in the school behind on their Ready-Core studies, but also managed to open young minds by leaps and bounds not possible with standardized teaching or measurable by methods of testing. Their very actions sending home children that would go home and pick up their phones like usual, not to tap away in search of self-worth, but to research avenues of the world they'd not known possible until shown. Because like all of us, there is little we can ever truly know of without being shown firsthand.

DAY 8
A Different Home

Barter, Daria, and even Windella were spread across the living room. Their snores and snorts harmonizing; exhausted from the previously eventful day of education and undoing of standards.

Even in these pre-sunrise hours, Dusky couldn't bring himself to go inside. He just watched them from the window, like he'd watched his son bettering his school from a safe distance. Dusky couldn't really say he'd ever done anything to better anyone. All his years mucking about preaching self-serving causes that never lasted longer than their predecessors.

"You a pervert or what?!" Windella's strung-out mother vulgarly croaked from behind.

He squinted at the slender, pale woman with red eyes and a chemically induced twitch. "Is that you, Kara?"

She scoffed as she took a shaky drag off of her cigarette. "What's it to you, peeping-perv?

"It's me, Dusky?"

It took Kara's sleep deprived mind a few moments longer than it should have. "Oh, you're Daria's ex man."

"*Yeah*… It's been a long time, how're you?"

"I'm-fine. Is my daughter in there?"

"I think so, yes."

Kara nervously wiped her nose. "Can you go get her for me?"

Dusky had to ask, "Why?"

She snidely retort, "None of your damn business…"

Dusky had pegged the woman the moment he'd first seen her. "You need money, huh?"

"No… So… She's my daughter, it's none of your damn business."

Dusky apologized. "My bad. But to be honest, if I even try to go in there Daria would probably have me arrested. Maybe, I dunno, she was kinda being cool earlier when she bailed me out…"

Kara had also pegged the grungy Dusky the moment she'd seen him. "You carrying?"

He cleared his throat as that ugly little urge peeked its head. "Nah, I've been tryin to stay off the hard stuff."

"That's cool… But if you got any cash I know a guy who's got some pink crystal-and he'll drop me an eight-ball nice and cheap…"

Dusky's head instinctually shook. "I dunno, I can't…"

Kara ignored his attempt to stay clean, nastily suggesting, "Maybe there's something I could do to change your mind…"

Dusky did as he always did, he took the easy affection over the hard earned kind. "Yeah-sure, why not."

The drug hungry woman grabbed him by the arm and drug him off; pun intended. "My friend's just down the other block. How much cash ya got?"

Dusky's foot suddenly stuck to the sidewalk like an anchor, jerking Kara to a stop.

"Whoa! What is your problem dude?!"

Dusky just stood there, because he felt like nothing was wrong; nothing at all…

"Hey, I'm sorry bro, but this girl

don't get down without some candy—like the pink kind?"

Having been locked up most of the morning and waiting at a middle school the rest of the day, Dusky hadn't had a moment to himself. The kind of moment he'd usually take to over-medicate until his worries drifted by with the high. However, Dusky was dead sober and all he could think of was Barter… "I'm so sorry Kara, I can't go with you. I have to be like I would want Dusky to be…"

She chirped, "You a head case or something?!"

He smiled, pulled out a twenty dollar bill, and handed it to her. "I really hope you use that money for something that makes you happier longer than meth can."

Kara gulped, then scoffed, and then passively grumbled, "Whatever freak." She walked off to do exactly as she'd planned, having nothing more than a miniscule glint of another's understanding to brighten her personal perception.

Dusky sighed with sadness for the woman lost amongst the selfish addicts and more selfish dealers. Still he found a smile as he savored his first taste of true difference. Though enjoyed, he was also completely lost on the next step. So he took a page from his kid's book, and asked himself, "Well Dusky, what now? …Think harder Dusky, pancakes are not—wait a damn second, yes they are… That's it!" He ran off to his not-so-trusty van, thanking the good people at the local food pantry for freely giving him the exact things he needed.



Barter's nose pulled his head up from the couch; eyes still closed, but his belly awake. The grin easing across his face was fueled by memories he was too sleepy to know he was remembering. Barter's feet slopped off the edge of the couch to the floor as his eyes crept open. He made his way towards the delicious smell, rubbing his eyes and bumping into walls along the way. Barter focused on the zippy figure in his kitchen, "Dad?"

Dusky nearly dropped a lot of things before he replied. "Hey buddy, um… I made pancakes to—for—I—*I* just wanted to do something real for my family…"

Barter's brain was trying, but his zombie-like expression said he just wasn't there yet.

Dusky flipped his pancake real quick. Then he motioned like a TV gameshow girl to a 2 foot stack of them on a plate. "I made pancakes?"

He yawned, "Barter loves pancakes."

Having been headstrong for hours now, Dusky rolled with it in spite of his son's sleepy. He kneeled down, gentle grabbed the sides of his son's arms, and gushed. "I just want you to know that I saw you yesterday little man. I mean, I saw how—amazing you are-and I'm like super father-proud I am-and I—don't really know where I'm going with this…"

"Barter's dad smells like smoky pancakes."

Dusky sighed with frustration. "That's because I was nervous, and the marijuana."

"Oh, okay. Is he trying to be different too?"

Dusky's arms stretched to the air with enthuse. "Yes! That's the thing I'm trying to say. And I'm trying to say I'm doing it for you…"

Barter could see the tears of joy for now in his chocolate eyes and the sorrow for his past failures in the worried crinkle of his brow. Moments like this had always been, by far, Barter's kryptonite. However, he was now wise enough to see his own faults and set them aside for something better. He leapt up and wrapped his arms around his father's neck, pulling him as close and tight as he could.

Dusky's arms trembled with hesitation brought on by self-loathing.

Barter said the one thing adults rarely said to him, but always made him feel wonderful; just like Dusky did. "Barter is *so* proud of his dad."

Dusky's arms fell over his son as he hugged him close, letting a few of those long awaiting tears fall away forever.

Unable to stay silent any longer, Goth Windy gushed, "*Oh my god*. I'm totally gonna cry…that's the most pancakes I've ever seen."

Daria gave the girl a look like she were downright out of her mind. She nonchalantly wiped the little wet from her eyes before anyone could notice it. "Dusky, why're you in my kitchen? Why're you in my house?!"

All three of them dropped heavy brows of judgement upon the mother holding her past pain longer than she needed to.

Daria gulped. "What? I'm sorry, but

there is a restraining order that's *kind of* being violated right now…"

Though Barter and Windy's brows of displease stayed like stone, Dusky's softened as he humbly said, "She's right, I shouldn't be here. I'm sorry Daria, but I hope these pancakes"—he gasped as he whipped around, flipped off the burner, and tossed the last burnt pancake onto the countertop—"These-uh, I-I hope these pancakes make up for the offense."

Barter really wanted to say something as his father moped by. However, he felt like his mom and dad were the only people who really needed to say anything.

Daria deeply sighed. "*No*… Don't go, I'm sorry, I just…"

"I get it," Dusky depressively droned. "I kinda bailed on you and Barter and you hate me…"

Daria unhappily quacked, "Well-yeah! But—that—I don't wanna feel like—that anymore… So, if you promise to clean the dishes I won't give you any shit for being in here."

Barter really-really wanted to say something to his mom for using the S-word, because she always did to him, but he bit his lip for the greater good; it tasted irony.

Dusky gladly replied, "Deal."

Daria did a California-stop when it came to the current emotional ride. "Anyways-I'm gonna get some butter and eat way too much pancake."

About to burst, Barter blurted, "Mom said the S-word-I want syrup-and Barter loves his different family-and new sister!"

They first looked at the boy like he

were a fountain of crazy. Then they burst into laughter while the 8 year old with impulse control caught his breath.

Goth Windy said what they were all thinking; a sidekick to the entire room. "We all love you too, Barter. Thank you for being so nice to us."

A few emotional throat clears cut the air around Barter's grinning visage. "Can Barter eat pancakes now?"

Everyone guffaw with agreeing replies; plates were passed out, butter abundant, and syrup slopped thick.

With a semi-mouthful, Daria felt the curious need to ask Dusky, "So how did you get in the house anyways?"

Dusky stopped mid-bite as he dawned the wide-eyes of guilt. He painfully swallowed the barely chewed bite and choked, "Well, uh-em, funny story and I'll totally fix it. *But*—I kind of put duct tape on one of those little window squares on the back door and *kind of* smashed it in…"

Daria looked seriously pissed for about two seconds, before she tried not to laugh pancake into her sinuses.

The rest of them following suit with Dusky snort-chortling a drumline into the inaugural laughter of an evolving home.



With full bellies and the remnants of grins, they all zipped about the house getting ready for the typical day of work and school. Goth Windy reapplying black and blue makeup, Dusky vigorously washing the ample mess he'd made, Barter getting his bag together, and Daria already uniformed to

serve.

There was a sudden knock at the door.

Daria's eyes narrowed as she made her way to the front door.

The smiling and colorful character of a landlord Lory was standing behind that opening door holding up a familiar check.

Daria gave a worrisome grimace to the semi-ghastly old woman dressed like she was in a renaissance play. "Um, why're you handing me back my rent check, Ms. Lory?"

She gave a raspy reply of, "Cause I can't take money when you don't owe me honey. And you can trust me on that, because I love money."

"*Okay…*" She carefully plucked the check from her landlord's grasp. "Still doesn't answer my question though…"

Lory explained. "Heck if I know either, dearie. Apparently you got a secret admirer, cause your rent was paid up to—well, let's just say it'll be next year before you gotta worry about paying me again."

Daria felt a little flush as she gasped, "That's-a, that's-a lotta money…"

Lory didn't care so much about that. "Whatever, anyways, I should go. Don't let that kid draw on my walls or nothing."

"Barter uses paper to draw," Barter explained as he now stood next to his mom.

Lory hummed, "Oh, well-*good*. Anyways, I got a hot date at the retirement-wait a damn second…" She gave the kid a squinty stare and then Daria. "Your boy is the one on TV shit-talking our damn Mayor dickbag?!"

Barter was already counting the adult S-words for the day; on the off chance there was an unspoken acceptable amount.

Daria proudly sat a palm atop her boy's

head. "Yup." She did a quick flip back to shocked as she asked, "Lory, what did this mystery person who paid my rent even look like?!"

Lory passively explained, "Came via certified Money-Mail with no return address." She lifted a stern finger to a guilty looking Barter; guilty not for the reason she thought. "I like the way you sass people, young man. Next time you give one of those politician's a what-for, tell him us senior citizens are tired of getting fu— screwed on our rights."

Barter inquired, "What're they doing to you?"

Lory wasn't really sure how to answer that one; you know, because she isn't a politician capable of college-quality convolution. "Well, to be downright honest, they just don't treat us with any respect."

He nodded with utter understanding; you know, because he's an 8 year old. "Barter will see what he can do."

Daria felt like she was about to faint from being in disbelief, now taken back by her son having adult conversations with adults.

Lory beamed as she pinched his cheeks. "Well aren't you just adorable."

Daria grinned and mumbled to herself, "That's more like it."

"Ow," Barter said, "But thank you."

Daria just had to ask her clever son, "Hey Barter, do you know anything about the rent getting paid?"

Barter was an all-around terrible liar, but he was very good at changing the subject. "Barter thinks Ms. Lory should have leftover pancakes, so he's gonna go get them

for her."

Lory gushed, "Well I could just fucking *die*. Daria, you absolutely have to make more those."

Barter had added that F-word to his multiplying curse word list too.

Daria worrisomely queried, "More of what, my son?"

"Yes," Lory quacked without restraint, "Breed and make more babies like that. Did you know the state will pay you for just having tons of kids? True story."

"*Yeah*… I gotta get to work soon, *so*…"

"Say no more, I was young and busy once."

Barter handed her a blob of foil wrapped pancakes. "Here you go."

"Thank you my *precious little man*," Lory cooed at him before turning her talk back at Daria. "You just be sure to give me a call and fill me in on this secret money-man, and if he's single and into kinky old gals with a fondness for fetishes." And Lory was off to do whatever it was she did most days; ironically enough, it was usually something different.

Daria took a moment to blink the unpleasant mental images she'd given her away. "Well, Lory's visits are always fun."

"Hey mom?"

"Yeah honey?"

"What's a fetish?"

Daria shook her head in refusal. "Nope. Not doing it. You're gonna be late for school, so get your backpack and get your butt movin." As her son hopped off to do just that, she tossed in an extra, "Barter, are you sure you don't know anything about the rent being paid?"

Barter kept his back turned, so his mother wouldn't see his uneasy expression, and said, "No, Barter's a kid and doesn't rent anything." He zipped off before she could poke holes in his not-so-inventive story.

"*Right*…" Daria couldn't put her thumb on it, but something suspicious was hiding beneath the surface of her son's tone; just like that time he tried to hide those frogs in the wall vent…

A semi-sink-doused Dusky asked, "You okay?" Even though he knew full well he was probably the last person she wanted asking her that.

Daria droned, "Someone paid my rent for the rest of the year…" She lift a subtle glare to him.

Dusky raised his hands in innocence. "Hey don't look at me. I just gave my last twenty to a meth-head this morning."

Daria's expression did not sway in Dusky's favor. "Oh really…"

He adamantly covered his own ass. "I only did it cause I felt bad for her, and then I came right back here and made pancakes…and in all honesty I smoked a *little* pot…"

Daria's displease dropped dead when she saw the clock on the wall behind him. "Crap!" She frantically speed-walked around with Dusky following her ranting coattails. "I'm gonna be so late for work-then I'm gonna get fired-then I won't be able to pay rent-and then I'll have to go back on welfare-and—"

"Sorry," Dusky politely interrupted, "But doesn't your rent being paid for a year kind of change—all that?" This time he was

the one playing sidekick.

Daria dropped her purse on the floor as she sat down at the dining table with a surreal stare. "*Wow*, I can't believe I'm saying this, but you're right…"

A full-gothic Windy asked Barter, "What's going on with your mom?"

Barter whispered, "Dad said a smart thing, like Goth Windy does for Barter, and now mom is gonna be different because he paid—I mean, *someone else* that wasn't Barter paid moms rent with money…"

Windy gave him the same look his mother had moments ago.

Daria waved her hands about as she sprung up from her seat. "No-no-no! I still gotta work or—something won't get paid."

Windella wisely stated, "Yeah-but, you don't gotta work a job you hate if ya don't need the money right now." She shared a slick fist-bump with an appreciative Barter.

Daria sat down, then immediately stood back up. She did a 360 as she looked around her home and it just felt different; mostly due to the fact that she was often out the door by this time. "I really hate my job…"

"Barter thinks it's con-cun—*counter-intuitive* and matzo-mass—*masochistic* to not quit stuff you hate doing."

Everyone stared at the 8 year old and his trusty second-hand dictionary.

As parents so often don't do, Daria listened to her child. She pulled out her phone, flicked to her contacts, and plopped a fingertip atop the one that read: WORK☹. "Yeah-hey this is Daria, let me talk to the manager."

Windy sang, "*Oh damn*, she be doin it."

Barter asked, "What?"

Windy just shushed him.

Daria raised a strong chin as her manager's grating voice appeared on the other end. "Hey Jeff, this is Daria. Yeah…no I'm not calling-in sick. I'm calling to tell you that I hate it there. I've totally seen you staring at my boobs, you're an asshole, and I quit. Also, send me my last check in the mail, because if I go there I'll punch you in your fat face." She sternly hung up before the bastard could utter a word.

Her family gave an approving clamor of claps and congrats.

Daria yodel, "*Damn*! *That* felt *good*!"

"You're my hero mama-D," Windy said with an undertone of laughter.

"I have wanted to do that for so long." Daria gasped with revelation. "Oh my god, I'm free… Ha, I've no idea what to do now…"

Her son suggested the obvious. "Get Barter to school?"

Dusky loudly laughed, inflicting the others with the same for a moment.

Daria honestly hushed, "I dunno if I feel like doing any of that."

Barter gasped in disbelief. "*But mom*?! Barter has to defeat the Ready-Core at school."

Daria smiled at her son with suddenly high aspirations. "That is true, but school also sounds boring."

Barter again gasped. "You can't say that mom."

The daring Goth Windy followed in her mini-hero's shoes. "I have an idea; how about today we all stick together like a superhero team, no matter what. And Daria's gonna be our fearless superwoman."

Daria's uncertainty eased off as a

flood of fun ideas leapt out from the once work-enslaved corner of her mind. She smirked at Barter's glowing expression; the idea of being a super team a secret daydream of his. "Okay, I got this. Daring Dusky?"

He was not a fan of hero names, but that one wasn't so bad. "Yes?"

"Go clean up that van of yours for us, because heroes need transportation."

Dusky could easily see her attention was on exacerbating Barter's enjoyment. He saluted and said, "I'm on it, Super Daria." Dusky stole a trash bag from the kitchen and went to fill it with van-dishevel.

Daria turned to an already giddy Windella. "Goth Windy?"

"Yes ma'am?"

"Grab a garbage bag like Dusky and fill it with blankets from the hall closet and cupboard snacks."

"I'm on it." Windy skipped off to wreak purposeful havoc.

Barter eagerly inquired, "What about me-I mean him-I mean Barter?!"

Daria grabbed her son and lifted him up atop the table. "You get to be my little strategist and help me plan the day. Now, I'm thinking some sort of beach and arcade kinda thing. What do you think?"

Despite instantly loving both of those ideas, he speculatively scratched his chin. "Barter has to think of a good way to do all that and make school better today, but it's making everything a little purple."

Daria had no idea what that meant, but she did know one thing that she'd just learned this morning. "Helping is a great thing to do, but some days you have to help yourself or you'll forget what help feels

like." Even she was surprised by what came out of her mouth, and how much it was exactly what she'd done for so long.

Barter's chin scratching ceased as he blinked with thought. "Wow mom. Goth Windy was right, you are a good leader. Okay, Barter will go to the beach and the arcade and it will be awesome. *But*, he will also stop by a place in the eastern hills called the Bing Lou Mo-Monis-Monastery."

Daria had to jump into that one head first. "Um, okay, I'll bite. Why?"

"Barter needs the monks to give him some ent-end-enchiladament?"—he had to peek in his bookmark-full dictionary real quick—"*Enlightenment*."

"Honey, how do you even know about that place or stuff like that?"

Barter gave a confident smirk. "He looked it up on the internet all by himself."

Daria crossed her arms in disapproval. "And just *how* did you manage to do that without *my* password?"

He laughed. "Because the password is Barter's birthday."

She honestly didn't have a good comeback for that one, secretly praying he'd stayed away from the usual adolescently curious internet surfing… "You should not be—but I guess—I dunno…"

"Don't trip mama-D," Windella assured from the kitchen. "I made sure he wasn't looking at nudie stuff."

Barter asked, "There's naked stuff on the internet?"

"No," Daria blatantly lied for the greater good, "There isn't at all and there never was… So-you wanna go to a monastery

and"—her deflection sent her falling back to her original query—"Why?"

He explained, realizing that Goth Windy was the only one aware of his switch from video games and TV to self-education. "Barter researched people that changed the world and some of them were monks that hated fighting; like Buddha and Gandhi, because he hates fighting too. And the internet said that they both had enlightenment, so Barter's gonna trick monks with his different to make them give him monk secrets about entch-ent… He's gonna find a new way to get it so other people can have it easy too, and not just old monks that are dead now."

Daria was at a loss for words, and honestly wasn't sure if that's how enlightenment worked.

"Seriously?!" Windy chirped. "That is—a *completely*, *insanely*, good plan."

Daria croaked at her, "How?!"

Windy casually replied, "Because it's the kinda thing no one ever does. And if the kid can crap-talk a Mayor, why not a monk?"

Daria took a deep breath with that knowledge tidbit and huffed, "Well shit, that is kind of a good point…maybe, I dunno. I definitely need more coffee before I go anywhere."

Barter counted that S-word as he hopped off the table and enthusiastically blurted, "So Barter can go by the Bing Lou!?"

Daria sighed with love for the trouble-making little pain of wonderfulness that was hers. "Sure, why not."

He exploded with jubilation as he ran for the front door shouting, "Barter's gonna van-gonna help the van get cleaned!"

Windy asked Daria, "Do monasteries have triple fudge ice cream and arcade games?"

They did not.



A familiar red-headed reporter shared stern words with her camera man. "*Well*, maybe if the community college-flunky driving this thing knew how to use the GPS right, Izzy…"

He 'skirt' the news van to the curb and turned his fervently facial-haired face to her. "For last damn time, my name is Isaiah."

Diana was already distracted with something else out the window. "Yeah-yeah, you're Jewish, whatever."

Isaiah's redwood eyes widened with offense. "And I now understand why your other camera man is on a permanent sabbatical…"

"Does that van look familiar to you?"

He groaned with defeat, "Why did I decide on photography as a major…?"

Diana abruptly harped at him, "Are you sure this isn't all your fault, Izzy?!"

Isaiah took a deep breath as he searched for the fortitude to calmly continue. "The reason the GPS doesn't work around here is because of those big electric towers we passed."

"So it is your fault?"

Isaiah preemptively placed the next extremely insulting comment upon the tip of his tongue, but he tilted his head and pointed out the window instead. "Isn't that the boy you're looking for?"

Diana swung her face against the

window. A smirk eased up her cheeks. "I knew it, those other idiots were way off on the location of Barter's home." She snapped her fingers at her camera man and chirped, "You better not pull any weak ass driving, Izzy. I want you to follow that kid wherever he goes, but do it inconspicuously."

Isaiah had to ask, "And why are we stalking a little kid?"

"Yeah-yeah, that'll be fine." She wasn't even listening.

He grumbled, "Fine, but I'm telling the police it was your idea and I was just doing my job."

Diana snickered like a supervillain, then hissed, "Oh I found you now my little ratings-maker. You and I are gonna be best friends forever…"

Although Isaiah currently hated his boss and even feared she was a crazy-bomb just waiting to blow, it didn't mean he wasn't good at his job. So he drove around the corner and parked at the end of the block, leaving the engine idle for a quick follow.

DAY 8

Home of the Original Different

Dusky hated being placed as the designated driver; not that he wasn't stoned, he just hated driving places he'd never been. "Are you guys sure this is the right road?"

Feet up in the passenger seat, Daria replied, "It's the only road."

Windy and Barter laughed in the back seat as they snuck candy from the beach-bag.

Dusky chuckled at that one himself. "Oh yeah, it is… Should I turn around?"

"*Oh my god*," Daria griped. "Stop whining like a bitch and drive."

That was the 1st B-word Barter had counted, or maybe the 3rd; either way, he was gonna meet in the middle at the 2nd.

Windy held out a package of chocolate chips to Daria and said, "Candy?"

"Please," she replied with a lingering annoyance in her voice; that is until she put the first handful of rich dark chocolate goodness in her mouth.

Barter pat his father on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Daring Dad. Barter did map research on the internet with satellites and everything."

Dusky grinned and griped, "Can we get a re-vote on my hero name?"

Barter gave his dad's shoulder a firm pat and watched as the sun's rays struck his focused visage with a dramatic glint. "Nope.

It's a good one."

Dusky whined, "Oh come on man? What about something like The White Panth—"

Daria grabbed the wheel and gave it a quick turn before he flattened the red squirrel skittering around the road in a panic! She snapped, "Watch the damn road you idiot!"

The tires lightly screeched as Dusky braked a little harder than he should have. "Dude! No side seat driving!" He loudly informed Daria.

Though he'd yelled at her more times than she could remember, this was the only time she could remember not caring. Daria let laughter sputter free from her lips.

The back seat joined her.

Dusky continued driving on as he chuckled, "Come on guys, I'm not gonna crash this thing for a suicidal squirrel."

Barter asked, "What's a suicidal?"

Daria sternly shut that down, "No-and don't you dare look it up in that dictionary of yours."

Windy filled her in on that one. "Oh that kid done already read that whole thing the day he got it." She then whispered, "I think he just has a crappy memory."

Barter grimaced. "Barter is grimacing, because he is pre-purd-perturbed."

Goth Windy played the part of a true sidekick; the one that knows most heroes need to have their heads deflated sometimes. "Sorry, but you're still a kid and you should probably respect the wishes of a mom cool enough to ditch school to take you to some monk-monastery."

Barter sighed away any frustration he had as he did what takes most people most of

their life; he took his own advice. "You're right, Goth Windy." He gave her gentle fist-bump of pure respect. "Here mom," he said as he grabbed his dictionary and handed it to her. "Barter wants you to have this."

Daria had to ask, "Why?"

"Because maybe if he trusts you with his book you'll trust him someday."

Daria held the tattered old book against her heart as her face melted with love. "Thank you, I'm sure I'll be doing exactly that soon enough." She'd never know why she said it, but she did. "You know, you are nothing like your father."

Dusky laughed. "I agree. And trust me, that's a good thing."

Windy giddily gushed, "OMG! I hella love this fucking family so much I wanna be fucking adopted by you wacky shits!"

Dusky burst into laughter as Daria put on her reprimand-tone and squawked, "*Windella*?!"

"Slow down Goth Windy, Barter lost count."

Windy and Daria chirped, "Of what?"

"Holy shit," Dusky unintentionally added to the count as he beheld Bing Lou Monastery appearing beyond the broadening hilltop.

Its many buildings rolled with the hills like boulders with clay-tiled roofs; one massive building sat high atop the center, crowning the precipice of the forest-hued hills.

All the S-words and F-words in the world wouldn't have mattered to the four of them in that moment as the early sun unveiled the 100 year old monastery in all of its humbling splendor.



Ashta and Rob were about the worst gate watchers that could be had in the Bing Lou Monastery, but only because they were amazing at other things.

Ashta's auburn gaze of boredom matched Rob's rhubarb stare behind his glasses.

Rob's slender chin flopped into his chest with an exhausted huff.

Ashta exhaled the last bit of patience from his muscular self. "My brother, you seem out of sorts; as the Americans say."

Rob honestly groaned, "That's because I'd rather be cooking or preparing to cook right now…"

Ashta nodded in understanding. "Yes, I too drew the short strum for this duty."

"I think you meant straw?"

"Yes, that."

Rob sighed. "So, what is it you'd rather be doing?"

"Sparring or eating your food."

Rob sighed again. "I've heard some of the others come here and take naps."

"Should we take naps?"

Rob shrugged. "I've heard worse ideas."

Before they could even enjoy their choice of laziness, a motley old van revved up the gravel road and parked right in front of them.

Ashta hummed, "Well that is very odd."

They all stared up at the tall stone pillared gate as they unloaded and stretched their legs.

Rob whispered, "What do we do?"

Ashta pointed out, "Talking might be a

good first choice…"

Rob pointed a finger of thanks at him. "Right." He cleared his throat and stepped forward with Ashta backing him up.

Before any monk could say a word, Windy blurted, "Oh damn! Look at the monk people! They're bald and everything. They even have clothes kinda like yours Barter, but in prison-orange."

As Rob fumbled with an 'uh' or three, Ashta realized he should've done the talking and did. "Welcome visitors. How may we be of assistance to you?"

Daria swooned at the musclebound mocha man. "Oh I can think of a few things…" She bit her lip a little as she assumed her fully functional flirting pose.

Windy further exacerbated everything. "Whoa, that one is, like, made of muscle and sexy."

Dusky mumbled to himself, "I have muscles too…"

Ashta had no idea how to reply to that, and Rob was still at a loss. Both their gazes dropped to the 8 year old kid giving them a subtle yet polite bow of his head.

"Hello, my name is Barter. Sometimes I talk in the third person, but I can't see it because I'm only one person."

They returned the boys bow.

"I am Ashta…"

"I'm Rob…"

Both the monks had trained for many years in the ways of mindfulness, making the oddity of the old soul before them that much more intriguing.

"Barter is glad to meet you. Could you please take him to where the enlightenment is?"

Rob and Ashta glanced at one another to make sure they heard the same thing.

Being the fastidious one, Rob recited the usual, "I am very sorry, but Bing Lou Monastery is only open to visitors on——"

Ashta silenced him with a gentle yet purposeful slap across the back of his head.

Rob turned a curious stare at him. "Why, brother?"

Ashta adamantly apologized, "Forgive me brother, I meant no offense. But there is a child asking you about enlightenment… Have you forgotten about reincarnation?"

Rob turned to the peculiar arrivals, then his ally in belief. "No, but… I am very sorry, but people are not my area of expertise. Food is."

Ashta sat a kind palm atop his brother's shoulder. "I understand." He looked at Barter and asked, "Would you mind waiting here with Rob while I check to see if the eldest will allow your visit?"

Barter chipperly said, "Sure."

Ashta bowed. "Thank you. I shall return shortly." He sprinted off up the stairs like the athlete he was.

Goth Windy loudly whispered, "This whole thing is a *total* head-trip."

Dusky tried to dip away with a quick, "I'll-be-right-back."

Daria grabbed his arm. "Nope. You're not sneaking off to get stoned."

Dusky dawned a guilty grin. "*What*? I was just gonna——"

"No you weren't," Daria refuted.

He griped, "Dude, why do ya gotta make me look bad in front of monks?!"

Daria scoffed. "When have I ever made you look bad in front of a monk?"

Barter whipped his best angry face at his parents, hands on the hips and all. "You two stop arguing and behave right now."

Dusky and Daria 'pff' and 'well I never' in no uncertain order.

"Hey!" He snapped at them, keeping true to his role reversal. "Barter's serious. He can't do amazing different-things if his parents are being jerks to one another."

"*Sorry*," they simultaneously groaned as the shoe fell upon the other foot.

Windy said, "Jinx."

Barter chuckled. "Barter likes being the boss."

Daria chirped, "I thought I was the boss, or superwoman, or leader-or whatever?!"

Barter used the same words she'd used on him countless times. "Well then start acting like it."

Daria pursed her lips with a scoff as a proud smirk peeked up the side of her cheek.

"Ha!" Dusky honked. "It's like he's the adult."

Goth Windy chuckled, "That's totally what it feels like."

Rob raised an attention wanting palm. "Excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt. But I was wondering if all of you are from one of those modern sects of monastery?"

Everyone was quietly confused for a second.

Rob further added, "I'm curious about your way of communal dealings. Who amongst you is considered the eldest?"

Goth Windy unhelpfully replied, "Dusky looks pretty elderly."

"Thanks for that," Dusky grumpily growled.

Barter did his best to answer the monk's question. "Barter's family isn't from a monstery, and he isn't allowed to talk about the sex S-word."

His family unproductively laughed behind him.

Super Daria quickly clarified before it was too late. "The S-word he meant is spelled differently and means different types. Okay?"

Barter connected the dots in his head. "So it's like different flavored monst-monasteries?"

Rob humbly answered before they could. "Yes, actually. It very much is like different flavors. At this monastery we house a lot of monks from other monasteries."

Dusky distastefully asked, "Are there any cute girls here?" The rest of his quartet team immediately harping at him.

Rob found their liveliness contagious, sharing in some of it with a chuckle of his own. "There are girls, and yes many of them are attractive; that is if you're into bald women."

Dusky nodded as he contemplated that one.

Rob again sought some clarification. "So all of you are family?"

Everyone gave hesitant shrugs, before Barter straightened their backs with a concise and certain, "Yes we are."

Upon that, Rob had many a questions answered and many more arise. "You are a very odd young man."

He smiled. "Barter's okay with it."

Goth Windy backed him up. "And so are we."

All attention turned to the stairs as Ashta strode down them like a gorgeous gazelle-person.

Super Daria and Goth Windy both bit their lips at the glistening mocha man. They simultaneously, and inappropriately, said, "I'd let him sweat on me." Thankfully, they'd been the only ones to hear one another, sharing a moment of sisterly 'aww' in reply.

Ashta's feet thud to a stop upon the dirt a few feet from the bottom step. He took a good breath or two before giving an enthused, "I have good news. It seems your unexpected—visit is welcomed and even—encouraged by Grandmaster Opol."

Considering Rob had fought long and hard the past couple years for the single conversation he'd been allowed with Opol, he replied with an understandable, "What the heck!?"

Ashta gave his brother monk a comforting pat upon the shoulder as he whispered, "Do not worry, Opol is pleased with our actions and we are now in his favor." He looked to his left when he felt someone's hands wrap around his bicep.

A grinning Goth Windy was looking up at Ashta. "Lead the way, big-N-meaty."

The muscular monk looked to his right to see Daria on his other arm.

Daria purred, "You heard the lady, us gals need to be *escorted*."

Dusky was really starting to feel the motivation to exercise again, or ever.

Daria tossed the perturbed Rob a bone. "Don't worry nerd monk, you're cute too."

Everyone looked up the stairs as an impatient Barter yelled, "Hey! All of you

are too slow! Barter's winning the race!"

Ashta cleared his throat. "To be clear, Opol was only interested in meeting the child…"

Windy scoffed. "That doesn't matter."

Dusky explained as he dramatically posed upon the first step, and yes intentionally. "Sorry, this family kinda can't be stopped when we get going." He turned his attention to his still ascending son. "I'm so gonna win!"

Barter squeaked with joy as a heaving Dusky did his best to run upward; the father now quite glad he hadn't taken a smoke break.

Rob watched his brother dragged away by strong women as he stood there guarding a van. One thing stuck with him above all else that was said. "Nerd monk?"

DAY 8
Everyone's Home

The air smelt of smoldering sweet sage and hymn with the somber sound of bells. Ancient oak and redwood pillared halls panned out in every direction, etched bronze capping their bottoms like boots.

Barter and his family all stood upon the stone floor in awe, staring straight up at the rafters covered in countless talismans.

Ashta politely guided, "This way please."

Everyone followed with the calm faces of tourists. Each of them having long forgotten who'd won the race up the stairs; as Bing Lou was the kind of place that drastically deviates from the norm.

The stone silenced their feet so that no one noticed when Goth Windy swooped down a hallway.

Mere moments later, Daria droned, "Wait, we lost one."

Ashta chuckled. "Do not worry. There is no such thing as lost amongst these halls."

"Well said my son," an older bald man with smile-wrinkles said; his bald wife dawning the same smile-wrinkles beside him.

Ashta beamed at the two of them, bowing in great respect. "Father, mother. It is an honor to see you."

Daria squeaked, "Your parents are monks?!"

Dusky whispered in her ear, "Everyone's a monk here."

"I-know-that-you-idiot," Daria snipped at him.

"Oh my," Ashta's mother chortled. "Who are your colorful companions?"

Ashta raised a proud chin. "I am escorting them to see Opol."

His parents beamed with enthuse.

"My-my," his father said, "You are indeed diversifying our monastery my son. Please, do not let us hinder your efforts."

His mother kindly bowed to them. "It was a pleasure to meet the two of you."

Daria did a quick 360 upon those words. "Um, where's Barter?"

Ashta's father chortled. "Upon the exact path he has chosen."



Goth Windy bore swift and silent steps as she slinked behind the post, watching the woman's movements the entire time.

Her slender body twist and turn as though swimming upon the 'bongs' and 'bings' of the bells.

Goth Windy had seen her fair share of fighting, both on the big screen and in her not so cheery upbringing. However, she'd never seen anyone trembling the air with their strikes as though they loved each flash of force released.

The bald young woman stopped and took a deep breath. "You do not have to hide sister. I gladly welcome your audience." Her stoically cheerful face fell flat as she watched the similar-aged woman emerge in an extra-thick glaze of gothic. "You're not one of my sisters at all…"

Windy went with the power of honesty. "I saw your lipstick and then I was watching you Kung Fu."

She smiled with that same navy lipstick. "How did you get here?"

"Oh-that big muscly guy, Ashma or Alfta or whatever, escorted me and my family up here so my little brother Barter could talk with some guy named Opol."

The monk was going with honesty as well. "I did not expect you to say any of those words."

They shared a short and subtle laugh.

"I'm Windy."

"I am Satoku."

Goth Windy pulled inquiry from her trusty teenage tool belt. "I didn't know monks were allowed to wear makeup."

Satoku may have been a stickler for her training, but she was an adoring fan of the universe's occasional oddities; the current one being Windella. "Bing Lou Monastery rewards those that better it and themselves. Being able to wear this lipstick from my past is a reward as much as it is a reminder of where I came from."

Windy cleverly jested with, "Well I didn't expect you to say any of those words."

Satoku found herself struck by a giggle. "You have a great energy to you."

"Let's hope so. I mean, I could use some superpowers."

Satoku spoke as the overachieving right hand to the universe's whimsy she'd always been. "The very fact that you are standing here implies you already have powers perceivable as super."

"How?!"

"No one who looks like you could have entered this monastery, let alone made it to this area of the monastery, without a greater mind than most."

Windy humbly cleared her throat. "*Well*, I appreciate the compliment, but the person with the real mind is my brother Barter. I could have never gotten here by myself…"

Satoku enjoyed small talk as much as the next monk, but she could see much more than most and knew this girl sought something different from her. "In our monastery we believe that purpose of self must come before any other words or your other words will not be true of who you are."

Goth Windy felt like a little fish in big damn pond, but she'd always been a good swimmer. She went for broke, voice quivering as she asked, "H-How do I get as strong as you?"

The monk wise beyond her years turned a sharp stare to what she now saw; for there was only one thing in existence that Satoku despised, and that was unnecessary suffering. "I can help you with that if you wish. However, I require a trade of truth; you must tell me two things. 1st, what you would do with my strength?"

Goth Windy answered without a breath of hesitation. "I'd use it to protect those that can't protect themselves."

Satoku had not expected such a noble answer, knowing full well that suffering invokes hatred and hatred fuels revenge. "But what about yourself?"

"I don't understand."

"How would you protect yourself from those that wish to hurt you?"

Windy felt that brave boy's influence once again, but this time it felt more like it'd acquired a zest of Windella. "I'd make them feel just like the victim they were trying to make without victimizing them at all."

Satoku sternly queried, "How?"

She smirked. "With moderation of my mean and some words they never expected to hear from a little goth bitch like me."

Satoku nodded in approval, having much zest herself. "The true warrior knows to balance brutality and kindness when faced with an enemy. This is something that takes years to learn, and yet you come to me already knowing it…" Her cheeks stretched as a large smile appeared upon her face. "Truly the universe will never cease to amaze."

Goth Windy held her chin high, feeling ready as she asked, "So what's the second thing I gotta tell ya?"

Satoku spoke slow and concise. "You must tell me the story of who hurt you."

Windella was not ready for that one. "Oh…well…it's a sad story about a sad person that I don't like telling…"

"They always are, but I insist you tell me anyways."

"Why would you even wanna know that?"

Satoku gave an answer she'd once received herself. "Because I cannot teach someone the ability to harm others who has not accepted their own suffering."

Goth Windy did not cower nor quiver in the face of change, she barreled into her origin story head first. Windy's tone range with certainty as she stated, "Then that's exactly what I'll do," before weaving the woeful tale of her past.



Dusky groaned at Ashta, "Yeah-love me some philosophy too, but we can't just let our kid disappear in a strange place."

Daria was pleasantly surprised; not by his parenting, but the fact that he'd referred to Barter as theirs and not just his.

Ashta's mother hummed, "You should know that there is no safer place for a child to disappear in."

Daria scoffed. "Well that is just nonsense."

The three monks laughed.

Ashta's father turned to his son and asked, "My boy, would you mind running ahead to confirm that their child is safe and sound while we speak with them?"

Ashta radiated with simple, yet rewarding, purpose. "It would be my honor, father." And in a flash Ashta was off; as swift as the youthful got.

"Such a quick one he's always been." Ashta's mother bowed her head at the concerned parents and said, "Please forgive our rudeness, I am Anala and this is my husband Kashvi."

The ever-concerned mother impatiently jabbered, "I'm Daria-this is Dusky-and I should go find Barter too."

Kashvi and Anala gave one another a grinning glance as they embraced the detour in their path.

Anala stated, "A mother concerned with her child is a good mother."

Kashvi backed her wisdom up. "And a

mother who knows when to let a child be concerned with themselves is a wise mother."

Anala topped off his words. "And a wise mother raises wise children."

Dusky let a light chortle slip. "You monks really like talking in philosophy, don't you?"

The elderly couple laughed together.

Anala honestly replied, "That does seem to be the norm, but I believe we go a little overboard with it."

Kashvi more technically explained, "It is basically a social quirk that we have all inherited by proxy."

Being a former drug addict, that made sense to Dusky. "I completely understand."

Daria croaked, "You do?!"

He croaked back, "I understand things."

Daria jested, "Not usually."

The monk couple could see the stale animosity in the air the two visitors shared from a mile away.

Upon Anala's elbow jabbing into his side, Kashvi stymied the visitors' growing argument. "Would the two of you mind accompanying us to the eastern balcony?"

Anala swiftly slipped in, "And it is only a short walk from here."

Dusky and Daria shared similar pessimistic grimaces.

Kashvi exactingly said to that, "Do not let who you were stop who you could be."

That verbal blow struck the ill-paired parents right to their cores. However, they'd fortunately a son wise enough to of shown them the power of difference.

Daring Dusky puffed his chest out. "The monk is super right, we should go with them and—I dunno, learn stuff?"

Super Daria fought the urge to roll her eyes as she used her mom-vision to see the truth behind Dusky's dumb. "Yeah, I think you're right."

Dusky's jaw dropped. His head held a handful of sarcastic replies, but he went with heartfelt. "Thank you."

"You're welcome?" Daria curiously replied as though he'd said the wrong line.

The parental duo, toughening scars and all, nervously walked behind the father and mother monks.

Daria gave Dusky a nostril flare wrought with uncertainty.

Dusky returned said flare with a confident brow raise.

Neither Daria nor Dusky knew what the other meant, but it didn't matter. For the first time in a very long time they trusted one another.

Anala and Kashvi both strode to the edge of the balcony and breathed in the crisp mountain air.

Daria and Dusky couldn't help doing the same as the marvelous view struck them; verdant and vigorous were the ascending hills. The only thing able to take them away from the splendor of nature was Kashvi lighting a little bone pipe as it hung from his lips.

Dusky sniffed at the air. "That doesn't smell like tobacco…"

Daria raised an eyebrow of disbelief.

Anala explained while her husband chuckled under a puff of smoke. "It is a specially grown cannabis with a higher than average pinene terpene, with a dash of homegrown baby sage."

Dusky very politely asked Kashvi, "May

I?"

"Please," Kashvi replied as he handed the handmade paraphernalia to him.

Super Daria powerfully squawked upon the expanse, "Hold on a damn second! Is this a monastery or a dispensary?!"

Anala sputtered her lips at that one. "Please, medicinal plants have been around long before those that profit off of them."

Kashvi clarified, "It does wonders for the arthritis in my hands."

Dusky handed the pipe back to him with a smile. "That is—a very well grown plant ya got there. It's kinda making the ache in my feet go away."

"Thank you," Kashvi said.

Anala loudly whispered, "Sometimes I smoke a little at the end of the day if my legs are sore."

Daria had to ask, "How does a couple of pothead monks raise a beautiful Adonis-man like that one?"

Kashvi and Anala shared similar amusement.

Anala wisely stated, "If there were only one good way to raise a child—"

Kashvi wisely finished, "Than that is what we would all do."

Anala said, "People are different from one to the next, meaning there is no one way to teach a child or adult."

"Isn't generalized studies kinda what monasteries are about?" Dusky surprisingly inquired.

Kashvi explained as Anala shook her head. "That is a stereotype created by seeing only the Buddhist belief in monasteries. In actuality, there are hundreds of different beliefs being

practiced in Bing Lou; we are of the Baha'i Faith that promotes the search for truth in all things."

Anala further philosophized as any well-studied monk would. "What we see of something is often what we want to see; especially when what we see makes us feel small in comparison."

"I get it," Dusky replied.

Daria scoffed. "No you don't."

He lightheartedly scoffed back. "I get things."

Daria 'pashaw' to that, instantly interrogating him. "Oh yeah, than explain it to me…"

Daring Dusky unleashed his power of perspective. "Okay, it's like how when you look at me and the only thing you see is a dumb stoner who bailed on you, but the man standing here right now is trying to be a father and a—friend…"

Daria raised a stern finger and dropped it with her humbled chin. "Well shit…everyone's just full of good points lately. I'm sorry Dusky…"

The old monk couple wisely shut their mouths for a moment.

Dusky put a hand on her shoulder and used a power that we all possess; forgiveness. "It's cool. I promise not to hold the past against you anymore."

That took Daria's breath away a little as forgiveness from an enemy was her kryptonite, but as weaknesses go she could've done much worse. "That's—thank you, I'll try and do the same."

Anala gushed at her husband, "I do love our daily walks dear."

Kashvi approvingly nodded. "Thank you

again for forcing me to do them."



Brave Barter strode forward with purpose, knowing full well that the biggest and most important person in any place was all the way at the end of it in the fanciest room.

Or in this case, the wisest and roughly dressed little man sitting on a ruined stone balcony, but still most important.

Barter stopped a yard or two from the meditating man ahead. Honestly, he'd expected something so far off base from what this Grandmaster looked like that he felt a little stupid; however, Brave Barter's very superpower was the ability to be different. He took one confident step forward and the rest just came with it. That is until he got close enough to talk to him, stopping and feeling like the lineless side-character in his own story as the words eluded him.

Opol's pale blue eyes opened like old floodgates as he felt his peculiar guest behind him. His crossed legs rose like a scissor lift, bare feet making a 'swish' upon the broken sandy edge of the 400 foot drop. He breathed deep and sighed humbly at the young man he was no more a couple feet taller than. A stern, bald-head-wrinkly squint turned up at the huffing muscle-monk behind the boy.

Ashta said, "Forgive me, the boy's parents——"

Opol's commanding yet calm tone cut Ashta's bold voice away with ease. "Tell them their child is safe with me and will

return to them shortly."

Ashta promptly bowed his head. "Master," he said before zipping off yet again, honestly enjoying the excess exercise he was getting.

Opol's eyes un-squint as he motioned to two old mossy stones. "Please, sit with me."

Barter nodded as he sat down and flared his nostrils with nerve-easing breaths.

Opol sat the same way he'd stood, his arms crossing behind his back. "So, you are the young man asking for enlightenment…"

Brave Barter found his voice as he realized the most powerful person in the monastery was a little old man with attitude; the relation obvious to a little young man with attitude. "Yes. Barter needs it to make the world different."

Opol's wrinkly face curiously pursed for a moment with extra wrinkles. "Would you like some tea?"

The internet had recently taught Barter that refusing a gift was rude; at the time he'd wondered why America didn't teach him that, until he'd gotten sidetracked by a funny TV show about parks and politics. "Please and thank you, Barter likes tea."

Opol silently stood and stepped to a desiccated corner where an already steam-streamed pot sat.

Barter had never seen anyone move like this man moved; it was as though he swam past the effort it took to move.

The monk pulled a couple old porcelain cups from under one of the dozen cloths hiding beneath the covered corner.

As he watched him pull spoons and jars of honey as if hidden for a scavenger hunt, Barter looked around some more. He noticed a

bedroll, pillow, and disheveled blankets beneath the largest part of remaining roof. "This is your room that you live in…" Barter's eyes crossed to the cup of steamy green tea held in front of his face.

Opol sat back down with his own cup like a spill-less gyroscope. "It is, yes."

Barter let the minutia of the moment carry his conversation; honesty the logo he wore upon his outfit. "Barter's room has lots of things in it, but Barter always feels like it's the things he doesn't have that he really wants."

For the first time in a very long time, Grandmaster Opol found his demeanor softened by disbelief. Like a song you can't get out of your head, the enlightened monk found himself meandering upon the same minutia. "It is human nature to want what we do not know. Do you know why I allowed you to speak to me on my day of personal rest?"

Barter took a swift sip with a following 'mmm' and casually shook his head.

"It is because I once had a son myself, and today is the anniversary of his death. In doing this I contradict my own belief to remind myself that only my actions can shape my world."

"Did you just tell Barter a secret?"

Opol took a sip himself. "Yes."

Barter sadly grinned. "Thank you for trusting Barter, but he knows that thinking about sad things can only make you more sad. That's why he doesn't think about his Asperger's brain damages."

The old monk found himself clearing the comical dust from his mind as he lowly chuckled. "You know, I have spoken with many a great minds that joke of children being

capable of greater wisdom than any adult."

"Oh-that's because we are."

Opol's brow crinkled with curiosity. "Please explain what you mean."

"Well—it's like how Barter doesn't think about how he can't do stuff, because he's 8 and can ignore lots of adult rules. But adults have to follow all the rules and make the rules and then they don't have any room in their heads for thinking like Barter does."

A wonderfully wide smile eased over Opol's often obstinate face. For him this moment was the universe speaking loud and clear and right to his damn face. "Though you may iterate as an 8 year old would, the wisdom behind those words is remarkable."

"Thank you, Barter knows what all those words mean because he has dictionary."

Opol felt an enthused tingle tap-dance through his body and mind as he let himself be the reason for the rhyme. "How can I assist you in making the world different?"

Barter gave his brave chin. "Barter needs enlightenment."

The monk sipped his tea and tapped his chin in thought for a second or three. "Such a thing is over-defined in our modern world. However, I personally believe that if enlightenment is something you wholeheartedly seek it can be attained within many a minor instances. But to enlighten oneself to understand all things is a much different task."

Barter sipped his tea and tapped his chin as well. "So it's like little enlightenments or big enlightenments?"

Opol haphazardly accepted that terminology with a nod-shrug. "One could say

that, yes."

Barter asked, "Does saving someone from a jerk boyfriend, buying your school pizza, making mayors look stupid on TV, getting science people to teach at your school, or paying your moms rent count as enlightenments?"

Opol's visage grew serious. "My boy, have you truly done all of those things?"

"Yup."

The monk's serious did not stutter. "You must be careful. Actively changing the world you live in can anger those that wish it to stay the same."

Being a fan of superheroes, Barter had known that from the very beginning. "That's why Barter has a team helping him."

"That is a wise choice. None the less, there are those that would murder for the sake of minor offense."

The boy dawned the look of man for but a moment. "Barter's had unsupervised internet time before, so he knows how bad people can be. But Barter also knows how good people can be. So he decides not to be afraid of what people will do for him being different."

Opol gave a concise nod as if he were speaking to an intellectual equal. "Fear is the only reason people fail and the only reason people survive. So those who can walk a path without fear are rare indeed, but often walk short paths…"

Brave Barter looked away from himself and saw the old tea-drinking monk for who he was. "Barter thinks you're a very kind man to talk to him like you are, but he's not good at philly-pholo-*philosophy* stuff. Could you just warn him like he were an adult?"

The monk could not refuse such a request. "As you wish." Opol took a breath and a sip before continuing. "You are a good-intentioned young man Barter, but the modern world is run by those that would destroy everything you love simply to maintain appearances you might have tarnished. If you do not stop what you are doing you will know only a short life of suffering."

"Barter knows," he acceptingly huffed.

Opol gasped with fervent disbelief. "I am sorry, but how could a boy say such a thing with ease? How could a boy know such a thing for that matter?!"

Barter calmly replied, "Comic books and cartoons and movies and sometimes video games, but only with the old school ones; new games are all graphics and no story."

Opol gulped downed his tea like he had that answer, gently setting his cup upon a small stone as if it were a guest beside him. He opened his mouth and shut it, instead letting a chortle build in his chest. "Such irony," Opol hummed as his chortle turned into laughter. "Wisdom within the same thing us fool monks deny. Hahaha! How I thank you for humbling me on this selfish day, my fearless boy ironically named Barter."

"How's Barter's name ironic?"

The monk gladly answered. "Because to barter is to trade, and today you bring me humility in trade for my wisdom."

Barter had to ask, "Is that a good trade?"

He adamantly nodded. "It very much is. So I insist you take full advantage of my mind and monastery while you are here."

"Can his family do the same?"

Opol revealed his one fatal weakness, an occasional lack of attention to detail. "Your family is here as well?"

"Yup. They're Barter's team."

Opol knew nothing of these people, but he safely assumed that anyone willing to drag their child to the mountains on a righteous whim were his kind of people. "Yes of course. So, are you ready for a true discussion?"

Barter smirked. "Barter was born ready."

He was impressed by this young man, but more importantly Opol was hopeful. "The truth of what is and what will be is a sad tale already told throughout human history. Are you certain you are ready for something that may cause you many a sleepless nights?"

"Like Barter said, he was born ready." And he was familiar with sleepless nights.



Dusky and Daria stood back in the hallway, chatting with Anala and Kashvi about various parental points.

Ashta kept a vigilant watch for Barter, humbly awaiting any further running requests.

A smiling Windy approached with a new friend of her own.

Satoku gave a kind bow to the familiar monks of her sect and the out-of-place family with them.

"Windy?!" Daria squawked. "Why are you bleeding?!"

Goth Windy's eyes crossed as she tried

to look at her own bloody nose and lip. "Whoops, thought I took care of that." She lift the already red-speckled brown towel and patted her face off. "There, better?"

Satoku nodded in confirmation.

Daria aggressively droned, "*No*, because you didn't answer my question."

Windy casually flailed her hand as she semi-explained, "Oh-it's just Kung-Fu-fighting stuff. I'm good."

Dusky unhelpfully asked, "Like the song?"

"Kind of," Satoku said to their surprise, "But not so much 80's flair and much more Wing Chun."

Goth Windy further clarified with enthusiasm. "Oh-right! Not Kung Fu, Wing Chun. It's way cooler cause it was made by a lady."

Anala and Kashvi chuckled at the new sparring partners.

Ashta abruptly gasped, "M-Master Opol?!"—he dropped a delayed bow—"You have diverged from your vow of solidarity…"

Opol simply said, "That time is over."

The rest of the shocked monks around gave belated bows.

Barter stood next to the wise monk with proud shoulders and a humbled visage.

Opol took a good look at each obvious member of the young man's family, giving an approving nod at each for reasons only he knew. He said to his parents, "Your son has changed my mind when no other man or woman in 40 years has been able to do so."

Daria uncertainly said, "Sorry?"

"On the contrary," Opol correct, "I could not have been happier than in the moment I realized a child knew better than

me."

Dusky lightly smacked Opol on the shoulder chuckle-chirped, "Totally get it bro, had the same thing happen."

The other monks raised eyebrows of worry at the way he'd spoken to the Grandmaster of infinite wisdom.

A straight-faced Opol glance at his shoulder for a second and then up at his gulping face. He grinned. "It is nice to be understood."

A familiar Rob suddenly squawked, "Grandmaster Opol?!"—he dropped the same belated bow as well—"You-you're not where you always are?!"

"Yes, that is over now." Opol's chest rose with breath as he panned the mismatched many of them. "Today this boy named Barter will be accompanied in his efforts to open minds by a strong and stoic monk."

All eyes turned to a terrified Ashta who pointed at Rob for some desperate reason.

Rob adamantly choked, "Don't point at me?!"

Opol harped, "Neither of you. It also appears strong and stoic do not describe me as well as I thought…"

Having held his tongue long enough, Barter blurted, "Let Barter introduce his newest team member, Opol the Awesome-Brained Monk-Master."

Everyone was stricken with tongue-tied shock.

Opol cleared his throat. "That's a little heavy-handed, don't you think?"

"How about just Awesome Opol?"

In Opol's infinite wisdom, he liked the word awesome. "…That is fine."

DAY 9
Needed Naps & Needless Nemesis

Dusky's dour eyes drooped over to the clock on the wall as the tired clomps of his family went by behind him.

Windy huffed, "Why're you staring down the clock dude?"

Dusky droned, "Because it's already—"

"Don't say it," Daria interrupted. "I don't wanna hear it-I'm going to bed-shut up."

No more words were had amongst the family as everyone slumped to the nearest sleeping area and passed out.

Opol sighed as he stood in the doorway. "This should prove quite the tempering journey for me." He took a short self-guided tour of the humble abode amongst the sound of snoring, seeing far more than most could between the dusty cracks and crevices. Opol sat his bedroll and tiny bag down upon the old wooden kitchen table. "This should do nicely." He took one more stroll to Barter's open door, staring at the drooling child that'd changed his world. "Such an unfair life for such a promising child…"



Her stout and stern-self fit well into the purple power-suit, equally stout N' stern face contrasting against the gaudy cross jewelry in her ears. She already stood

in strong judgement of the haphazard sleeping arrangement in the living room; fully loaded degree in social services ready to fire.

Windella's eyes crept open to what she thought was an eggplant with two legs.

The woman cleared her throat in a ghastly manner. "Do you live here, *young lady*?"

Windy's nostrils flared as her eyes refused to adjust for a second. "Kinda, yeah."

With less worry than she should've had, the woman asked, "Has someone been hitting you?"

Windella yawned, "It's okay, a girl punched me."

The social worker's face expressed nothing remotely close to okay. "Okay, I need you to tell me where Daria Garcia is right now." The formality in her tone opened Windy's eyes wider as it sent Dusky sitting up.

Windy shook her head a little and harped, "Who the heck are you?! Did you break in here?!"

The woman pompously spat, "The door was *wide* open…"

With one barely open eye, Dusky grumbled, "Whose ders open?"

Daria's head suddenly popped around the corner with a toothbrush in it; still in pre-awake sweat-pants and trailer-trash top mode. "Did I hear someone talking?"

The woman whipped her attentions to the pre-morning mother. "Are you Ms. Garcia, mother of Barter Davidson-Garcia?"

Super Daria knew a social worker when she saw one, and only had one thing to say.

"Get the fuck out of my home!"

Without batting an eyelash, the woman of wicked intent flipped open the small file in her hand. "It says here the state took custody of Barter for a few months when you became addicted to alcohol and was arrested on a D.U.I.?"

Daria spit out any toothpaste in her mouth, tossed her toothbrush aside, and pointed at the door without batting an eyelash. "I told you to get out of my home, now."

The dedicated assaulter of character rolled right past her words. "My name's Brenda Benton and I'm here working with Coriander social services to investigate a case of potential child neglect."

Daria's voice deepened. "Oh-don't you dare-I will punch you in the damn face."

Daring Dusky turned himself into a wall to block Daria's rage. "Whoa-whoa-whoa! No one's punching anyone." He purposely hissed through his teeth at Daria, "Especially not some state-funded android who could have you arrested."

Daria glared at Brenda and calmly said, "Those allegations are unfounded. Please leave my house."

Brenda brazenly scoffed as she motioned to the kitchen without looking. "Ms. Garcia, you have a homeless man sleeping in your— where'd he go?"

Opol made her jump a little as he appeared behind her and said, "I believe those that turned the wheels that sent you here are not the good people you think."

Brenda squawked, "What?!" She shuffled around furniture to make sure she had a clear exit. Her eyes of judgement flung over

to Daria. "Allow me to correct myself, a *crazy* homeless man sleeping in your kitchen."

Awesome Opol ninja-starred an old and tattered identification card right into Brenda's open file!

The social worker suddenly felt out of her depth as she glanced at the stoic old man, then stared at the faded red card that just had to be a fake.

Opol calmly stated, "This family is under my supervision and protection. That modern form of identification should clarify."

A bull-faced Brenda whipped out her hefty phone and typed the cards letters and numbers into it. Her jaw dropped in offense of reality, giving the old man and the picture on the card a good glance or ten. In the face of the unbelievable, Brenda did what most of us do and lashed out. "I will not be manipulated by some group of white-trash degenerates!"

Glares panned the room while Opol frowned and asked, "Was the card not clarifying?"

"Oh it was!" Brenda matter-of-factly projected, not that she had anything else after that. "…It—was!"

Dusky held out his old ID card often used for things it shouldn't be and hummed, "You wanna see my little government card too?"

Brenda scoffed and took a stern step away. "First of all, you smell like marijuana."

"Well that's not fair-I always smell like marijuana."

"Second of all, there's no way this bum

is an ambassador."

Barter suddenly yawned, "What's an emberassador?"

Brenda dropped some parentally offended jaws of her own as she zipped up to Barter and asked, "Do you feel safe here young man?"

Barter tried to blink away his tired as he squinted at the loud purple blob in front of him. "What?"

Goth Windy stuck herself between Brenda and Barter. "You need to step away from my little brother."

Brenda did exactly that and then some, but with a demeaning series of scoff-huffs. She whipped that phone up with a number ready to call. "That's it, I'm calling the police, because I feel the situation hostile." Her thumb struck down upon only her own palm. Brenda looked at her empty hand. "What the?! Huh?!"

Awesome Opol walked away from her, holding the smart phone with two fingers as though it were a rectangle of grotesque.

Brenda barked, "That is theft of private——"

"You are wrong about everything," Opol interrupt with his well-earned, commanding tone. "I suggest you listen to the young man you questioned earlier."

All eyes turned to the beaming Barter. He wanted to gush about how cool his life was, waking up to his family and a grandmaster monk standing against an actual villain in a purple power-suit. However, Barter was a bigger fan of continuing the cool. "This is Barter's family and home. This is where he feels safe. Please don't be an enemy to that."

Brenda was flabbergasted, once again choosing arrogant anger over understanding. "Is someone making you say that? Because that is not okay and you can tell me the truth."

Daria's mouth opened with understandable disgust, but Barter stopped that with his swift answer. "Of course someone made him say that. Barter is someone and he makes himself say stuff all the time."

Once again the 8 year old had silenced a room.

Dusky's laughter sputtered through his hands.

Brenda raised a rude finger to them all. "Okay, someone is *obviously* manipulating that child."

Brave Barter did as he knew he must, he walked right up to the woman and motioned for her to come closer.

With an uncertain expression, Brenda leaned in.

"I want you to listen to Barter. Right now, you're the bad guy."

Brenda recourse with sputtering scoffs of offense.

Opol walked away from the social worker with her file buried in his face. "Curious…"

Brenda gasped in disbelief, taking a double-take at her now empty hands. She cumbersomely quacked, "Stop doing that!?"

The monk had no concern for her offense, because she'd already made it apparent that finding offense was her primary job. "Who is this 'Reputable Source' listed as the initial filer of the complaint?"

Brenda's head looked like an angry

tomato sitting atop an eggplant. "That file is state property and is not for—"

Opol took a page from Barter's book and went with bold honesty. "You are here trying to use this file to cause the family in this room great pain; are they not privy to the knife you wish to put in their backs? How dare you assume these kind people deserving of your assaulting visit and destructive judgement."

Barter really wished he could use words like that, but he was still a trainee in the ways of iteration.

Thrown off by the homeless man's wise words once again, Brenda said what so many of us say without regard for what we do. "I'm just doing my job…"

Windy let the words fall from her mouth, "Then please stop doing your job."

A pause paralyzed the room as a woman sent to hurt others lost her purpose in the best possible way.

Opol let Barter take the phone and the file from his hands, giving the boy but a humble grin of understanding.

Barter placed the phone inside the file, closed it, and calmly handed both to Brenda Benton. "Our fate is in your hands. Please be nice to it."

Brenda had spent so much of her days feeling above others, safe upon a righteous pedestal. For her to step down from it was not a simple mental exercise, her face scrunching and clenching behind her infuriated huffs. Brenda's shoulders suddenly relaxed as her internal fight fumbled and she asked the quick-handed old man, "Are you really an ambassador?"

Opol nodded. "Yes. My homeland chose to

honor me in this manner due to my many worldly ventures in propagating personal and spiritual freedoms."

Without thought Brenda bitterly scoffed, "Worldly ventures." She swiftly said, "Sorry, I—I'm just…"

"Trying to understand?" Barter finished to everyone's unexpected awe.

Brenda humbly hummed, "Yes…" For the first time since she'd stepped into their home, she took the time to actually see them. And Brenda didn't see the child neglecting dissidents that a piece of paper had told her about; no, she saw a family of different people standing together in a way she couldn't recall her own family ever doing.

As much as any one of them wanted to open their mouth, they just waited for the mentally trekking social worker to arrive at the station in their reality.

Brenda felt a little flush as she realized that she was intentionally going to fail at the same thing important people pushed her to succeed in, people that tried to have her break apart the unique family in front of her. She was trying to accept the very concept of her own righteous employers being vicious monsters insisting the vindictive. "I can't—I can't—I can't just leave here… I'm sorry…"

Brave Barter used his powers of perception to see a woman standing alone between allies turned enemies and enemies she was forced to make; one much more threatening to her way of life than the other. "Don't be afraid Brenda. Barter will be your friend if no one else will."

Brenda sadly hummed, "I can't, I'll get

fired…" She turned a blink and head-tilt to the air as if those words shouldn't have come out.

Daria pointed-out, "People can get fired for good reasons too."

Brenda's head throbbed as she fell a finger at Daria and growled, "You swear to me on your mother and father's graves that you are treating this young man with decency and respect."

Super Daria simply and certainly said, "I swear."

Brenda nodded, then nodded again. "Okay then…" It took a minute for the surreal situation to sink in, but Brenda got there. "*Oh* son-of-god-damned-bitch. Sorry, excuse my language."

"Barter excuses it, because he does it too when his mom isn't listening."

Daria dropped her hands to her hips and raised an eyebrow at her boy.

Dusky whispered to his kid, "They call that putting your foot in your mouth."

Brenda let out a nervous laugh. "Okay, this is the deal… So when people talk about politicians, what they don't say is that they're all just a buncha rich people…"

Goth Windy tried to help the conversation roll on. "*And*…?"

Brenda just blurted it out, figuring she was gonna get fired either way. "Some rich politician person is the one that filed the complaint; his fancy lawyer came by and did all the paperwork so it doesn't look like him and everything."

Opol opened his mouth to most likely say something awesome, but he was derailed by everyone's laughter.

The family had the same mindset as they

chuckle and snort to a huffing end.

Dusky had to reiterate that one. "So you're telling us that some political fat-cat is trying to bully an 8 year old autistic boy?"

Brenda could but offer a shrug-nod or two in reply.

Daria's face pursed with pre-laughter as she said, "Maybe I should call the fat-cat's mother."

They all laughed a little more and a little louder to that, Brenda adding a chortle or two of her own.

A smiling Opol and Barter simultaneously said, "That's not a bad idea."

Barter incited more humor as he honestly asked, "Isn't Barter supposed to stand up to bullies and fist fight them?"

The room buzzed with the static of merriment; a short moment in comparison to any other in existence, but more meaningful than most.

Brenda suddenly croaked, "I have no idea what to do…"

Opol suggested, "Perhaps we could all appeal to your boss about this matter?"

Super Daria superseded the monk as an idea struck her. "No-no, I have a way better idea. We might need your help with this Brenda. How do you feel about filing a joint complaint against this rich person with us and the *ambassador* here?"

Brenda scoffed. "That's an insane idea. No judge in their right mind would sign off on that."

Barter asked, "What if the only thing Barter wants from him is an apology?"

Brenda suddenly felt a wave of courage

as she put the pieces together. "I *might* have an idea, but we'll need to convince someone at the police station to help us."

Daria smirked wide and proud. "I got a friend there who just might do that."

Brenda nervously sighed. "Okay then, I guess we'll just need a way of getting this to the media."

Everyone turned to their unexpected eavesdropper clearing her throat with intent.

The professional stalker, Diana Folknor, smiled and waved at the smiling and waving Barter. "I think I can help with the media part."

Daria angrily griped, "Will someone please close the damn front door!"

Day 10
Leagues & Legions

Barter couldn't remember a time his house had been so full of people. All of them talking and carrying on, ignoring the turned on TV and even their phones occasional buzzes and beeps. Barter was feeling a little nauseous from the color green, and he was starting to miss the people at school a little after two days of adventures, but that wasn't going to stop him from celebrating their accomplishment.

Dusky asked, "You okay kid? You barely ate your mozzarella sticks…"

"Barter's fine, things aren't so green now."

Dusky snagged one of the lingering mozzarella sticks off his son's plate. "So I can have them? Wait, what's green now?"

Brenda ended her lively conversation with Diana and her camera man Izzy when she saw the News19 logo pop up on the TV. "Ooh! It's on! Everyone shut up!"

Opol chortled at her enthusiasm, enjoying his own sense of unique accomplishment after using the same thing he'd shunned so many years helping him; status.

Everyone scooted closer as they held their breaths.

The very pretty news woman panned a big realtor-smile as the music came to an end. **"Good evening, I'm Kami Candice and this is News19. Fire downtown, the newest Warehouse-Mart goes up in—"**

A universal '*aw*' of disappointment rolled over the room.

Diana scoffed, "Thought so. I knew those politician pandering producers wouldn't put it at the top of the hour."

"But the bigger fire in tonight's news was set by a young man, his family—"

Everyone swung their gazes back to the screen.

"And apparently the Ambassador of Irket. It seems our Mayor has gotten himself into some questionable legal trouble mere days before his reelection campaign is set to begin, but what impact does this have on us?"

Diana jealously jeered under her breath, "Damn that Barbie doll can spin a story like a pro."

"Our own Diana Folknor interviewed that family of a familiar young man earlier today. This is what they had to say."

Goth Windy gushed, "OMG! That's me on TV! Again!"

Dusky had to ask her, "What was with the sexy face?"

"What's with your stoned one?" Windy retort.

Dusky tilted his head to himself on the TV and had to say, "Touché."

Daria shot them a swift, "Shh!"

The Diana on the TV asked, **"So Ambassador Opol, would you mind telling us why you're here in front of the Coriander city police station today?"** Opol looked to the Barter beside him and said, **"I am helping this young man defend his family from those that seek to damage it out of their own misguided fears."** Barter jumped in with a less long-winded answer, **"Mayor Mark**

used lawyers and social workers to try and make Barter's family look bad. So he—"

Daria smooshed her face against her son's and beamed, "I'm so proud of my little man!"

"And you're the actual worker sent out to their house?" TV Diana asked Brenda, only for the sake of dramatic flair of course.

Real world Brenda grumbled, "My first time on TV and I have fat chin…wonderful…"

TV Brenda perkily replied, **"Former worker, actually. I quit like twenty minutes ago and added my name to this brave boy and his family's harassment complaint against the Mayor and social service department that allowed it to happen."**

Real world Diana smirked as she watched herself gearing up for the bombshell.

TV Diana Folknor turned her brick gaze back to Isaiah's camera. **"That's right Coriander, not one or two, but five people and an ambassador are legally going after our very own Mayor. All of them seeking one simple sense of recompense…"**

Diana took a breath and held it for her own pause.

"An apology. I'm Diana Folknor, and this is your news."

Claps and cheers cluttered the living room as everyone enjoyed their moment, and rightfully so. They had done what people simply didn't do anymore. They'd stood against something wrong that hides behind supposed systems of right. They'd done it together, because in a world where one person can destroy a family with an assumption we must all be a family.

Barter lifted his soda can to the room and, after vigorously researching it online

of course, loudly toasted, "To everyone here! You are all amazing and thank you! And welcome to Barter's League of Amazing Individuals!"



"An apology. I'm Diana Folknor, and this is—"

The plastic remote in Mark Michaelson's hand creaked as he resisted the urge to chuck it at the TV.

The Mayor's new, much prettier, advisor sighed and straightened her sleek glasses. "This is not good for your campaign."

"Yeah-no shit Annabelle. So glad I hired someone who went to beauty school."

Annabelle's symmetrical face soured as her straight cinnamon hair stayed stoic.

"I need to get ahead of this thing," He stated as he picked up his phone with more vindictive desperation in mind.

"That's not a good idea."

Mark condescended, "And why's that *sweetheart*?"

Annabelle did what she did best; strategized. "Because any public action you take is going to make you look just like they're painting you out to be. Your only choice is to wait it out and take a late campaign start due to family health issues or whatever bankable lie sounds better, or you can adopt an art-of-war method and attempt to befriend these people without ever publically apologizing. Also, don't call me sweetheart."

Mark raised his brow to her. "Huh, so you are smart."

She habitually fidgeted with her

glasses, responding as she kept her face buried in a binder. "And apparently you don't look at the résumés of the people you hire."

"Don't sass me sugar-tits, just fix this crap."

Annabelle decided to let this misogynistic man know exactly who he was dealing with. "Don't worry sir, I'm the best damn campaign advisor you will ever meet. Yes I'm young and pretty and easily overlooked when my credentials aren't speaking for me, but I bust balls and break backs of *better* men every day of the damn week."

Mark's smirk said it all. "And here I thought the high price-tag on your services was because of that cute butt of yours, and rumors that you you're a nympho."

Annabelle's face stayed stony. "I can assure you that this cute butt of mine is not for sale, and I will not be talked to like a floozy secretary; these terms are non-negotiable."

His smirk did not fade. "Yes ma'am. So, how're you going to help me destroy this little retards reputation?"

Her expression only slightly shifted under her glasses. "Well, I can't say I've had to crush an 8 year old child before, but I suppose with some methodology-tweaking it shouldn't be hard. However, you might wanna consider the less risky approaches I'd mentioned before."

Mark leapt up from his chair, disheveling his desk. "My dear Annabelle, the only reason I have anything that matters is because of the risks I take." He flicked his finger across the bottom of her chin.

"So lighten up and tell me how we are going to get this done and done fast."

Annabelle handed him the open binder.

Mark grimaced at the dumb name, "Dusky Davidson, and why does this person matter?"

She took her binder back. "He's the father of this Barter kid and he has a lengthy history of drug use and military protesting…"

The Mayor was no slouch in the area of sinister, but even he seemed a little shocked by her insinuation. "Are you really implying I call the Colonel?"

Annabelle gave a calm nod for yes.

Mark chuckled a little. "Even I think that's excessive, but I love it. Still, the piddly favor he owes me may not be enough for something like this."

Annabelle's stony expression spiced with a sinister smirk. "I'm sure my godfather would have no problem doing a favor for his goddaughter…"

Any good villain would've been proud to call Mayor Mark's evil chortle their own. "Beautiful. I'll let my friends at the police station know what's coming."

The pug-faced lawyer that'd been sitting silent in the corner this whole time suddenly said, "As your moral legal counsel, I'm gonna go ahead and say aloud that I never heard this supposed conversation."

Mark scoffed. "Spare us the semantics, Leland. My lovely advisor and I both know there's nothing moral about what you do."

Leland shrugged his bald head with an utter lack of concern, staring at Annabelle's everything like he'd been blatantly doing the whole time. "Either way, I will draw up a few documents to keep

things tight on our end."

Mark gave a round of pleased nods at them. "Well, it seems we've got the makings of a real dynasty here folks. Keep this up and we'll all be well on our way to that cesspool of minority voters; Washington D.C."

Annabelle hummed, "I prefer legions over dynasties; they just sound nastier in a way I like."

Leland actually stopped staring at her lady parts and looked her in the eyes. "I like you."

Annabelle simply said, "Thank you, but if you ever try and touch me I'll break off the first finger to do so and shove it up your ass."

Leland happily blurted, "Now I like her more!"

Mark laughed along with their self-serving sense of joy. "Legion it is then."

DAY 11

A Foe Never Fought must be defeated by Fighting as Never Fought

With Opol teaching the kids outside yoga and the rest of his League spread throughout the school teacher-assisting in various ways, Barter took the lull in parental presence to sneak out of class with the classic pee-dance trick. His path taking him right to the unsupervised computer room. It was time to finally use his cleverly acquired, adult pre-paid money card. Because with that, he was finally able to add himself to the infinite internet of people trying to do more than just be seen.

His carefully-plucked eyebrows curiously skewed as he peeked up from behind a nearby computer screen. His lean cheeks crinkled with a grin as he recognized the young man in the unusual outfit, fittingly ditching class.

Barter eagerly turned on the screen, grimacing with much less eagerness at what was no longer the Windows-whatever password screen. "What's Ooh-butt-too?" He mispronounced before turning on the screen to the computer beside him; it was the same. "Barter thinks someone broke the computers…"

"They are not broken," a sternly dressed man argued as he stood from one of the computers. "On the contrary, they are leaps and bounds better."

Barter stood up and locked eyes with

the odd bespectacled man for an equally odd moment; as though the both of them bore autistic tendencies.

The supposed adult amongst the two of them fumbled past a few chairs, straightened his reading glasses, stopped an awkward ten feet from Barter, and didn't introduce himself; just fidgeted with his kempt brown hair.

Barter didn't need superpowers to see the man's weird, because Barter was Captain Weird. "Are you a child kidnapper?"

His fidgeting fell still. "I am a AAA certified software and hardware technician."

"If you're not a kidnapper, would you mind helping Barter fix this computer?"

The man's uncomfortable demeanor squelched beneath his scoff. "It is not broken. The operating system on there before was broken-a veritable array of pointless process bent on data-mining anyone dumb enough to think the phrase 'user friendly' is anything other than a mass-marketing mask."

Barter expectedly replied, "What?"

The quirky technician quacked, "Move," as he squeaked a chair up beside Barter. "The password is Barter."

"Hey, that's Barter's name."

He chuckled. "Well-yeah. I mean, yes. You are the reason I"—his fingers swiftly ticked away with a melodic beat, opening multiple screens—"Did all of this. You see, it has hundreds of thousands of educational games in this folder and millions of books in this folder. Also, the system leaves an easy to navigate personalization option so teachers can create their own unique, as well as easily addable and removable,

curriculums. Also, my personal anti-virus software gives zero chance for anyone to wirelessly steal data or mine anything."

The 8 year old, that was not a technician, had a thoughtfully scrunched-up face. "Barter doesn't understand most of the things you said, but he can tell that they are all very impressive and studious."

Like most people meeting the one-of-a-kind kid for the first time, he was thrown off his usual verbal path. "Uh, okay, it also has lots of—wallpaper backgrounds…"

"That's cool. Can you show Barter how to get to Killer-Com.com on the internet?"

"The website making company?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

Barter widely smirked at the friend he'd yet a name for. "So Barter can change the world with Bartering For Bravery—dot com." He scooted closer to the computer.

The technician's eyes widened as a child sat the kind of pre-paid card down next to him that a child shouldn't have. "That looks fancier than my actual ATM card…"

The autistic Barter stepped right outside of his supposed disorder and properly introduced himself. "I'm Barter, and you are?"

The man smiled at the belated introduction. "My name's Anderson."

Barter shook his hand and said, "It is a pleasure to meet you Anderson. Is it wrong for Barter to think you might wanna help him with this when you already helped with all the computers so much?"

"No, not at all. But I have to ask"—he pointed to the card—"How"—then he point to

the computer—"And why?"

"Barter paid a man named Javier Gutierrez to purchase it for him in exchange for cash money."

Anderson turned his head and read the name on it. "Ah-yes, Javier Gutierrez, right there; how clever. Why the weird internet site?"

"It's Barter's way of making more Barters."

"…I do not know what that means…"

Barter pulled out a dense clump of folded lined paper and handed it to Anderson. "Is this the internet icon?"

He nodded as he perused the thoroughly written plan, despite a lot of it being in crayon.

Barter went right to the site and started entering the cards information.

Thankfully, Anderson was a quicker reader than Barter could type. "Hold on a second, please stop typing."

Barter finished putting the card numbers in before stopping. "Why?"

Anderson held up the papers. "You cannot do something like this. The legal ramifications alone are too much. A site like this would be shut down in a day."

"Read the last page."

Anderson's certain expression grew more uncertain with each line he read, his lips skewed by surreal in the end. "You…do you think it will work?"

Barter sighed with uncertainty. "Dunno, but Barter does know that it'll be up to the people that use it if it works." He turned back to the computer and slid the arrow icon over to the 'verify card' icon.

"Stop!" Anderson awkwardly blurted as

he slapped his palm down atop the mouse. "I—I can, if there's any significant amount of money on that card, I can make you a way better site than these crooks."

A big smile splashed over Barter's face. "Barter likes you, you're weird like him but different too." He took his hand off the mouse and held it out to shake. "Fine, he'll trust you to do this for him like a business partner person."

Anderson shook that hand. "Deal. It might take a little while, but I will devote my every waking second to this site until it is finished."

Now Barter had to ask, "Why?"

Anderson honestly answered, "Because I wish it existed when I was growing up… Maybe I would be more like you and less like me…"

Barter pat the odd man on the shoulder. "It's okay, Barter likes Anderson the way he is."

For the first time in many years, Anderson said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."



Windy's face squinted up with annoyance as she increased her pace.

That didn't stop Esmerelda's perky demeanor and bouncy red curls from skipping right alongside her. "Do you think Barter will like my purple dress?"

Windy lost it a little after being followed to the bathroom and now back by the girl. "OMG girl! You *have* to stop buggin me, okay? And you're way too young to be pining over some boy anyways-so stop with the—

everything."

Esmerelda tossed up some puppy dog eyes and whined, "But if I make Barter my boyfriend, than everyone will like me too."

Windy skirt to a stop, giving the girl a worrisome grimace. "Okay…okay, so, okay." She cleared her throat. "You should only be someone's girlfriend if you like them for who they are, and vice versa."

"*Oh…* Who's vice-versa?"

Windy sighed. "It means it's the same for being a boyfriend."

"*Oh…* That's stupid. I'm gonna ask what Barter thinks."

"*Please*, *please* ask anyone other than me anything."

Esmerelda crossed her arms. "But you have to take me to Barter."

"What? Why? When?"

"Aren't you always with him cause you're his sister?"

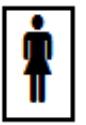
"No…maybe, sometimes-does everyone think I'm his sister now?"

"You're not?"

Windy blushed a little. "No, I definitely am."

"Good." Esmerelda assertively took Windy's hand. "Then hurry up and take me to him."

Goth Windy grumbled, "I shoulda just held it in."



Dusky eyed the bags of burgers once again, unsure how many he could eat before his family got mad at him. "Whoops, California-stop," he said as he cruised right through a stop sign. "Shoulda been

staring at the road and not food."

Traumatically familiar flashing lights and a quick quip of a police siren went off right behind Dusky's van.

He nearly jumped out of his seat as he awkwardly 'skirt' the vehicle to halt near the front of the school. Daring Dusky had seen his fair share of traffic stops, and something about this one didn't feel right. As he watched the two officers walking down both sides of his van, he pressed the red button on the side of his phone, typed in a quick one-handed text, and sent out the Barter-signal. Dusky only hoped he could stall them by talking…very…slowly.



Covered in finger-paint and smiles, Daria was in her element. She'd really missed helping with the kindergarten class, making her wish she'd quit her job years ago and done this instead; poverty be damned.

Every nearby kid, including the one in Daria's lap, turned their equally paint-polka-dotted faces to her pocket as it played the Captain Planet theme song; copyright be damned.

Make no mistake, Daria was just as confused as the kindergarteners for a second or three. She gasped as she remembered setting up the Barter-signal and her son saying he'd made it the planet hero song. How her son even knew about cartoons canceled before he was born was a mystery to her.

The little girl in her lap asked, "Who's a Capn Plant?"

Super Daria sat the child down and

looked at her phone. She swiftly stood up and swung her apron around to her back like a cape. "Sorry adorable children, I've gotta go save my sons father from something that's *hopefully* not his fault."

The children and teacher watched as she zipped out of the room behind the wake of paint pattered cape.

The husky and bubbly teacher took a second to gather her thoughts before huffing, "Well-what was that about?"

One of the kids raised his hand and answered, "I think Ms. Daria's a superhero."



The old monk Opol was not savvy to technology. So he listened to the entire unusual yet informative and empowering song on the rectangular device.

The song started over.

Thankfully, one of the fourth graders learning yoga was tech-savvy. "I think you're supposed to swipe up to answer that."

Opol honesty inquired, "Swipe up on what?"

Another student said, "The screen part, with words on it. My grandpa has a phone too."

Opol ignored that grandpa comment and swiftly swiped upward, almost knocking the device out of his hands. His face grew stern with purpose as he looked to his students. "Forgive my sudden leave, but do any of you children know which way the"—he looked at the text again to reiterate it—"Front school now FML, and then there's a little yellow face that appears to be screaming in

terror."

A volley of fingers pointed across the field to the chain-link fence.

"Thank you. Now remember children, with regular yoga you can stay quite agile; even at my age." Opol proved his point as he whipped around and sprinted off across the field like he were an athlete.

The class watched in awe as the old man hopped the fence like it were a hurdle.

One of the kids said, "My grandpa can't do that."

Opol zeroed in on the police lights and zipped up to the commotion and growing crowd.

Two police barked orders at Daria as she got between them and Dusky with his hands raised in peace.

The burlier officer unclipped a pouch on his belt. "This is the last time I'm saying it, Ma'am! Get away from the assailant or I will pepper spray you!"

Dusky unhelpfully harped at him, "I don't have any live butter! You put that in my van!"

The other younger officer was already on the radio calling in some backup.

The burly officer didn't give a second warning as he whipped the can of aerosolized-burning sensation out and pressed it.

Rust-hued liquid harmlessly sputtered underneath Opol's fist as he mashed the can's top like putty!

The burly officer dropped it and leapt back in shock as he fumbled his sidearm out. "On the ground! Now!"

Opol calmly lifted his hands to the air. "I am ambassador—"

The burly officer furiously interrupted, "I DON'T GIVE A SHIT WHO YOU ARE! GET ON THE GROUND!"

Barter suddenly ran out in the line of fire. "Please don't shoot Barter's family!"

The younger officer adamantly lowered his burly buddy's firearm.

To which the aggressive officer growled, "What're you doing!?"

His partner quietly growled back, "You're pointing a gun at a kid and there's people everywhere…"

The Burly officer put away his weapon and held out a commanding palm. "I need all of you to step away from that man!" He pointed to Dusky as boldly as he'd spoken. "Other officers are on the way and anyone——"

Barter blurted, "Why're you arresting my dad?!"

"I need you to step away——"

"No!" Brave Barter blatantly refused as he tossed up a stern palm of his own. "You need to answer him!"

The burly officer grabbed Barter's extended arm!

Before Goth Windy knew she'd made the decision, her one hand was releasing Esmerelda's and her other was jamming the burly officer's thumb backwards as she forced him to release her brother! In went her breath and out went her will, twisting the larger man's wrist into his own weight until he crumpled to his knees!

The younger officer lunged for the grappling goth.

Windy kept on breathing as she held onto the husky man's arm while rolling overtop him, letting the lunging cop fall over his own partner! She plucked the pair

of cuffs from the first police belt in sight, snapping one side over a wrist and the other over an ankle. Windy stepped back and exhaled as the officers fumbled about. She hummed to herself, "Wow, Satoku was right, it's always there…"

Daria roared at the incapacitated police, "How dare you lay your hands on my son!" She then whipped to Windy and hissed, "How the fuck did you do that?!"

Opol sighed. "Well this has gotten out of hand…"

The officers barely got their awkward bearings before they realized a big crowd of people were glaring them down.

The burly officer griped, "Stop moving so I can grab your keys."

Looking up at an angry mob made the younger officer anxiously spout, "You're all interfering with police business! That man was in possession of 3 grams of a controlled—"

Daring Dusky demonstrated his rare quick-wit. "Bullshit!" Cursing first of course. "How do you know the weight of something you supposedly just found in my van?!"

As his partner froze, the burly officer snagged the key and undid his wrist from the cuffs.

The guilty look slapped across the face of the younger officer was seen by all.

A worrisome silence fell over the crowd.

An enthusiastic supporter overeagerly shouted from amidst them, "They're trying to frame Barter! Get em!"

Despite everything smelling like licorice to the point of dizzy, Barter

screamed at the looming crowd, "No! Stop! They're just doing bad things because bad people told them to!"

The younger officer's hand slid off the unclipped gun still at his side. His fight or flight response choked to a stop in the gray area of his mind he'd yet to explore.

Barter struck a stern foot to the concrete to keep his balance and continued. "They just had bad teachers and leaders. So please, treat them kindly, because that's how you'd wanna be treated if you did something wrong."

Another couple cop cars suddenly pulled up, officers popping out in an authoritative tizzy.

The burly officer quickly informed them of the situation, making their faces assume similar confusion as he pointed to the 8 year old at the head of the whole mess.

Opol's palm gently pressed against the small of Barter's back as the child tried to tip backward. He gave the boy a loving smile and an ever-understanding nod.

One of the other officers that'd arrived stepped ahead and said, "I'm afraid the man name Dusky Davidson will have to come with us. Anyone who stands in our way will be arrested for obstruction of justice."

Barter looked right to the young officer still stumbling around his moral middle-ground. "Please help us…"

The young officer's heart raced as he glanced around at the many a shoulders standing side by side; each ready to defend the same pot-head he was told to be a degenerate scumbag in need of imprisonment.

The officers began their march through

the crowd as Barter yelled to the young officer, "Please! Be better than they want you to be!"

"STOP!" All eyes turned to the young officer, his face fervent with fear and fury. "It-I didn't-I, I let this happen…" He also let himself do the exact job he'd wanted to do when he was a child; take down the bad guys, even if he was one of them. He ripped his badge from his shirt and tossed it to the ground. "I was misinformed about Dusky Davidson and coerced into planting an illegal substance in his van by—by my boss the chief of police, Dick Darellson."

That ended the officers' authoritative march before it'd barely begun.

His burly partner croaked, "What the heck are you talking about man?!"

A less agitated officer asked, "Is that true?"

The young officer simply sighed, "Yes." Then he turned and walked away from everything he knew for the sake of who he was; back forever turned to the justice he once thought existed.

Windy jabbered, "I so shoulda recorded that on my phone…"

A familiar gothic girl hummed from a few feet away, "Don't even trip, I've had my phone going since this started."

Windy gushed, "Oh-my-god-Mandy, I love your stupid face *sooooo* much right now."

Mandy replied, "You best ya bitch."

The platoon of police looked around at one another, waiting for one of them to not be at a loss for words. The first thing any of them could say was, "Okay, let's break it up here people."

Dusky harped, "You're the ones who

started all this. Why don't you leave?"

Agreeing nods and nouns rolled around the crowd as more recording phones popped up in self-defense.

Principal Procrustean popped out into the middle of the madness. "What is happening here-why're you officers at my school?!"

The burly officer sighed. "We-uh, we were responding to a false report…"

The Principal blurted, "Then why are you still here causing a scene!? Please leave!" A grin bounced around his cheeks as everyone clapped and cheered.

The burly officer got as far as an angry brow wrinkle before another one grabbed his shoulder and projected, "Sorry to bother you people. We'll be leaving now." They wandered towards their cars, inaudibly bickering about the whole personal relations nightmare that'd just occurred and whether or not they'd be employed tomorrow.

Dusky unintentionally quacked, "Holy crap-attack. The Barter Signal worked…"

Principal Procrustean sucked up the admiration he was in dire need of.

Daria chirped, "Where'd Barter go?!"

Opol did a swift 360 and huffed in annoyance. "How did he even do that?"



Everything tasted like strawberries, so Barter threw up on the wall beneath the window. "That feels better." He froze mid-breath at his own reflection in the window as the distance-blurred word 'VOTE' was right next to his head. Barter spun around and smirked at the big voting sign in the

distance for Mayor Mark. "That's it…"

"I found him!" Opol shouted as the others soon followed behind his youthful stride. "Are you okay?" He inquired with a fearful tone.

Barter turned his smirk to Opol. "Barter is great."

Daria and Windy opened with an ear-splitting salvo of reprimands at the disappearing young man.

Dusky followed up the rear and huffed, "Dude—how do you—old—move like that?"

Daria snipped in reply, "He doesn't smoke an ounce a pot a day, Dusky…"

Dusky grumbled, "Not fair, you know me too well."

Barter blurted, "Everyone shut up and stand over here." He adamantly waved their pessimistic faces over to the window.

"*Ew*," Windy squeaked. "Is that puke?"

Barter mushed them all together and pointed at the window. "Look at the word."

Opol read, "Vote?"

"Exactly!" Barter yelled in excitement. "We should all run for mayor of Coriander!" His family's faces did not bode confidence.

Daria was the first to say, "That is crazy and very crazy. No more crazy of any kind, you got that? We're done with this whole different thing, back to normal."

Dusky surprisingly said, "*Yeah* I kinda agree. A cop just tried to frame me for a crime…I'm out, like *way* out."

Barter turned his dropped jaw of shock to Goth Windy for a little backup, but found none.

"Sorry kid, but I'd never go against your folks wishes…"

Barter felt the fit arising within him,

took a deep breath, and said, "You're all just afraid. But listen to Barter, you don't have to be afraid of stuff if we're the ones in charge of that stuff…"

Opol could see the unwillingness to yet again bend before the boy's logic; a long ingrained fear of authority keeping them exactly where it was always meant to. "I am very sorry, but your son is right. Anyone willing to do what was done today is not going to stop until Barter is stopped."

"Hold the phone," Goth Windy unhappily projected. "Why is the monk talking like there's a comic book villain after us?!"

Awesome Opol did his best to insist the reality they were living in. "Because there is. You have stymied and denied the vengeance of this person twice now."

Daria droned, "Ah-crap, he's right…"

Dusky suggested, "We could always just move to a different state, or country?"

"Barter's not going anywhere," he said with a brave stomp. "This city is his family's home. He won't run from it without a fight."

Goth Windy got in on the enthusiasm. "I second that! Screw authority!"

"Windy!" Daria reprimanded. "No, that is not—no, just, we're just regular people who have no business dealing with real world villains"—she looked right at Windy—"And *will* go to jail if we try to *screw* authority. Right Dusky? You got my back on this."

Dusky slinked next to Barter with a guilty grin.

Daria griped, "Oh no you don't."

"Sorry," Dusky preemptively apologized. "Trust me, I'm completely terrified of this

idea, but this time I don't have to be alone."

Windy whispered, "That was embarrassingly cheesy."

Dusky gave her a disappointed dad-brow.

Daria's shoulders slumped as she realized what was coming to fruition. "Are you people serious? We can't just all separately run for mayor. Barter's 8 and Windella's 16, so they can't run for mayor at all."

Opol added, "Also, as an ambassador it is illegal for me to run or occupy political positions in the country I am not an ambassador to."

Daria adamantly motioned to the monk. "See, and that. So what do we have, a couple kids that run and two people too poor to buy any of those fancy plastic *vote-for-me* signs."

"Then Barter will make them, because we don't have to do what they say we have to do."

Windella backed up that ideal with fumbling eagerness. "Yes-yeah, that is like different-I mean, we can just do whatever different campaign thingy we want, because it's up to the people in the end. You know, we the people and voting and whatnot?"

Opol seconded, "I may not be able to participate, but there is nothing that says I cannot act as an advisor."

"Heck with that," Dusky said with a smile. "You're gonna be our head of security with all that Kung-Fu agility you got going on."

Opol chuckled. "I will do both if you don't mind."

"OOH!" Windy loudly cooed. "I can

totally YouTube everything."

Opol asked, "What's a, you tube?"

Windy answered, "It's a website everyone puts videos on for people to watch, oh and a buncha ads nobody really wants to see tryin to brainwash you to buy crap."

Dusky jangled his keys, "I got the transpo taken care of."

Daria couldn't hide her grin any longer. "You people are all insane, you know that right?"

They all mimicked her grin.

Super Daria sighed in wonderful defeat; still on the verge of worrisome tears though. "Fine, once again, let's do whatever crazy thing the *8 year old* suggests…"

Barter took his mother's hand and pulled her into a group hug.

Opol shrugged and stretched his arms around the girth of them.

"Okay-enough-with-the-sappy," Daria chirped as she ended the hug. "Seriously you psychos, if we're gonna do something like this we gotta really think stuff through."

Opol raised a polite hand. "As your advisor and head of security I suggest a video as to why you will be running. It also might be wise to add clips of the news with Barter and what happened today if possible."

Windy clarified, "Yeah-I'm sure what happened today is already all over the internet."

Dusky covered his eyes and squinted at the reflective window for a moment. "Hey guys, I think we have an audience inside."

Windy waved and said, "Hello potential voters."

"As your advisor I will take my job very seriously," Opol said in that

attention-turning tone he could command. He knew he must get through to them above all else, taking his given counsel with great mindfulness and heart. "As such I must give all of you one crucial piece of advice. Take tomorrow to be only with yourself, letting yourself deal with that one thing that weighs heavy upon your thoughts and heart to this day."

Daria had to ask, "Why?"

The enlightened monk gladly answered, "Because to benevolently rise above those that seek to destroy who you are and make the world around you better, is an age old dance us monks ever-fail at throughout this world. But the one thing we have learned for sure, is that the only way to accomplish anything is by dealing with our personal failures first."

Barter had to ask, "Can we go home and eat chocolate chip pancakes first?"

Opol eagerly replied, "Absolutely."

DAY 12
Windella's Woeful Quest

Goth Windy strode down the street with purpose; not a hint of gothic to her little white jacket and blue dress, nor smidge of makeup. Windy dressed this way to make sure that woman recognized and remembered her… "Man I hate this street," she grumbled to herself, ignoring the insidious eyes of its section 8 apartments' chiefly unemployed and unhappy inhabitants.

R-Stank saw the unusually ungothic gal from down the block; and yes, R-Stank chose that name on purpose and no one knew why. His platinum grin went wide as he rudely shut up his lively gang of lackeys ruling over the apartment steps. R-Stank pre-flexed his prominent muscles for her approach as he tossed his black dreads back.

Windy hated R-Stank. However, today wasn't the day for Windella's usual reflection of disdain. Though most couldn't see it from the outside, today was a day of love for her.

R-Stank hollered, "Damn Lil-Win, you be lookin all kinds a white girl gangbangable."

Windy replied, "I guess that's how some people say hello."

R-Stank continued his vulgar verbal versatility. "You and me girl, I'll make it clap better than you *ever* had that lil white a——"

"Sorry," Windy politely interjected, "But today isn't the day, R-Stank." She pulled a small stack of documents from her

characteristically black purse. "I gotta find my mom, court stuff."

"*Shit*," R-Stank poignantly replied. "Why would I let you know about that crack-head bitch? You aint given me nothin…" He gave her a sinister up and down.

Goth Windy didn't even flinch at his leering. She dug a couple curls of cash from her purse and handed it to him. "That's like thirty or forty bucks. Now can you can you tell me where she is, please?"

R-Stank sighed at the ugly pile of money in his hand, then sighed at the grinning Windella. "Alright-shit, fine. You're lucky yer cute. Yer moms round the corner in J building. Just up the stairs once and straight down the hall; you'll know the place."

Goth Windy gave the gritty gangbanger something rare in his world; sincerity. "Thank you so much, R-Stank. If you ever stop being a gangbanger person you should ask me out on a date, because I think you have an adorable smile and an unspoken kindness to you. *Bye*."

And just like that, R-Stank was left looking pleasantly confused.

Windy had pulled a Barter on a man lost at the bottom of America's unfair hierarchy. Her feet carried her ahead quick and true, wanting to spend as little time in this awful area of Coriander as possible.

Veering off the larger street and into the deeper belly of state-funded poverty came with a waft of urine; because when people are treated without dignity they easily succumb to the undignified.

Windy's nose curled and twitched as she did her best to ignore the smells around

her.

Unconscious users alike slept upon the sidewalks and sides of stoops; reserved to the only escape from sorrow they could afford.

Windella looked up at the ugly copper J on the side of the graffiti-dashed building.

It was obvious that whoever funded the construction of these awful buildings was separating people by their own prejudice opinion of quality.

Windy took a braving breath and went inside.

The smells within the building were not much better, mostly cigarette smoke permeating the hazy air of the human-made Hellhole.

Windella went up the stairs, sliding past anyone in her way.

The junkies and jackasses jot javelin-eyes at the out-of-place person in their self-perceived pit of pleasures.

Goth Windy had recently learned to move past the selfish stares of others, putting that skill to the test today. Because today she was on a mission, as she knew that tomorrow she'd become the mission. She sighed at the top of the stairs. "R-Stank was right…"

It didn't take a Sherlock Holmes to deduce the degenerate dwelling feeding dredges of society into the world. There was no evil henchmen or hired thugs guarding this villainous cave with an always askew door. It wasn't the kind of lair that the wicked used to hide from the righteous, it was the kind of lair that lured those with weakened wills into it.

And so Windy waned her way inside,

those lingering down and around the hallway making little to no eye contact. She pushed through the door as her breath slimmed to the chemically-pungent methamphetamine smoke.

One of the men propositioning a woman next to him turned a mean-mugged glare up at Windella. His bald head crinkled as his lips pursed around his haphazard stubble. "Can I help you, little girl?"

Windy confidently said, "I'm looking for Kara."

The man aggressively rose from the couch and loomed at her.

Windy was like stone before the posturing parasite of the male species.

He spat in reply, "She's servicing my bro in the back, bitch. So unless you plan on servicing me, I suggest you walk right the fuck back out that door."

Goth Windy smiled, kissed the quickly confused man on his forehead, and then grabbed the back of his neck as she drove her elbow into it once!

The bald ringleader dropped to his knees gasping for air and his two real world Orks of men jumped up as their drug-groupies got out of the way.

Windy's smile was no longer upon her stoic face, but the calming joy from it was present in her every action and affirming breath. Her palm flattened against the kneeling man's forehead as she shoved the back of it into the closest Ork's crotch!

His buddy hesitated but a second, soon wishing he hadn't.

Goth Windy yanked the kneeling man to his feet, bashing the top of his head into the bottom jaw of the oohing Ork! She took a

hop back, then a hardy stride forward as she shoved both her palms into the bald man's chest!

The hesitant man in the back with a sore jaw had barely pulled his knife before he watched his fellow Orks fall overtop him!

Goth Windy's adrenaline fueled her fight as she took Satoku's teachings to heart in totality. She skipped overtop the seat of the closest couch and drove both feet into the edge of the arm at the other end. Windy pushed every ounce of what little weight she had into the arm as that and her momentum stood it up upon the same arm she was standing. Goth Windy roared like a beast as she let the heavy couch roll overtop her back and continue its flipping path to a person flattening end!

The three men barely had a second to holler before the furniture was reposition atop their heads with a cringing 'clomp'!

Windy fell to her butt and huffed her tired out as she took a second to be shocked. "Whoa… I might have, like, a talent for this stuff…" She shook reality back into her head and hopped to her feet. "You, depressing drug-slut, where's Kara at?"

The semi-sobered woman nearby stammered, "He-uh, she-uh, they-uh, th-there sh-she's down that way in the last room."

"Thank you." Windy strode down the hall with a purpose, leaving the violent trio twitching and groaning underneath a couch.

A half-dressed hooligan angrily flung the door at the end of the hallway open! His veiny face seethed red as he barked, "What the fuck is happening out here…!" His clean-shaven face twerked into an ugly state as he spat, "Who the fuck are you bitch?!"

Goth Windy's subtle grin remained as she politely said, "Please move aside."

The villain viciously replied, "I will beat your pretty little face into——"

Goth Windy whipped a foot up into the man's crotch! She grabbed the side of his gasping face, leg whipping around to block his feet, and drove that head right through the sheetrock!

The man's feet failed to tumble forward with the rest of his body, her perfectly placed leg making his skull drop down through the length of the wall like a sledge hammer!

Windy stepped over the quivering and contorted creep.

Kara awkwardly buttoned her shirt when she saw her daughter step through the door. "Wi-Wi-Windella?!" She squawked. "What're you doing here?!"

Goth Windy handed her the papers and a pen. "You're going to sign right there, because I deserve better than you for a mother."

The papers gently shook under Kara's constant drug-trembles. She may've been high, but she knew what the phrase 'forfeiture of parental rights' meant.

As her mother opened her mouth to voice her refusal, Windy wisely and lovingly said, "Please, if you love me you'll sign those papers. So I never become like you."

Those words cut clean through Kara's drug-addled consciousness. She looked at her daughter like she hadn't in years, finally seeing the woman she'd become. Kara's breathing quickened and her eyes watered as she signed the papers. She tossed them and the pen back at Windy as she harped, "Just

get outta here and go—live a nicer life than me…"

Windella simply and sincerely said, "Thank you, and goodbye."

The crying Kara went in search of the first high she could find, because killing herself to escape reality was the only love she thought she deserved.

Goth Windy turned away from her past, leaving behind the pain that weighed her down for longer than she'd cared to count. She stepped over and past groaning goons with a subtle smile upon her face. Windella had fought through fire and achieved her goal, freeing herself from her self-doubt. She'd tempered like steel, cutting clean through those that dared stand in her way and becoming unbendable before the challenges that face her.

DAY 12
Dusky and the Devil

It'd been a long while, but the fruitful smells of the farm filled him with the feeling of home. Dusky pulled his van up behind the mailbox at the front of his estranged folk's farm; the acres of wooden fence as well kept as always. He turned off the vehicle and bashed his steering wheel a few times, ending with an uncertain, "Shit!" Dusky knew in his heart he had to do this, but everything he'd told himself since he'd left at 17 was walled between him and this choice.

Dusky grabbed the keys in the ignition, fingers clenching to turn it on and U-turn away from there forever. But he didn't, because it just felt far too familiar. He huffed, "Damn it…I'm just running away again…" Dusky saw a few smashed M&M's on the floor and smiled. Even when he was alone he found his son reminding him of who he was, and for that he felt like the luckiest father in the world. Dusky yanked the keys from the ignition and tossed them down on the seat.

The dust of the dirt road waft a ring as the van door slammed shut.

Dusky breathed in and calmed his nerves the best he could without medicinal help. Just like he'd done all those years ago, he made the walk down the mile of driveway as sober as a sidewalk.

Horses, sheep, chickens and cattle alike roamed the acres of pasture; hedge-

apple trees and trickling creeks abound the span of green.

Dusky couldn't help the sad grin on his face. After all, it was this serene stroll down uneven gravel and potholes that'd first freed him from a life he'd been orphaned to in the first place. He suddenly stopped and turned his head to a familiar looking fluffy face.

The 150+ pound Pyrenees gave him a gruff 'wuff' from underneath its dirty white wool of a coat.

He croaked, "Disaster-Zone?"

The hefty hound gave a 'grr' and 'wuff' in reply to that.

Dusky shook his head as the animal walked away to continue its guardianship. "Nope, has to be related though." The thought of his old walking buddy living on through further generations made him happy. He continued his reminiscent walk.

It wasn't long before the modest, metal-roofed white house appeared ahead. A lovely green lawn, covered porch with swing included, varying color iris accented porch, and a healthy sized greenhouse partnered beside it. The whole thing looking like it were right out of Better Homes magazine, humming birds and finches at nearby feeders singing along with the tranquility.

Dusky stood a few feet from the steps. He knew full well they'd all be here on this fortuitously-timed day of rest, but he found himself unable to knock. He couldn't even lift a foot onto the first step, because this was still a home Dusky never wanted to step foot in again.

The screen door slowly creaked open. The 6 year old in a white button shirt and

black suspenders popped out from inside.

Dusky simply said, "Hey."

The straight-faced boy did not reciprocate.

Dusky remembered where he was and the words came back to him like riding a bike. "Ich binn sorry. Vo is dei doett?"

The boy smiled at the man's apology and inquiry of where his father was. He zipped back inside without a word.

It wasn't long before a hubbub of inaudible chatter emerged from inside.

A man a few years younger than Dusky emerged alone; full Amish beard and simple garb stating his belief as brazenly as any flamboyance could. "Kann ich helfa du?"

It was oddly familiar to have someone in this place treat him like a stranger. Daring Dusky knew the man was just asking if he could help him, so he shot straight from the hip. "Ich binn sorry, but my German is a little rusty; dayt du meinda English?" He knew that question was a little shaky and probably said wrong.

The man nodded. "Yes, that is fine."

"Thank you. First, I'm sorry to bother you on this holy day. But…I lived here many years ago. Do you by chance know a man named Jasiah and his wife Rosemary that lived here?"

The man's face curiously perturbed as he stroked his beard once, the rest of his plentiful children watching from windows. "Onnmaajilich aus kjielkje ute kruck at," he huffed to the whole situation.

Dusky laughed at the old adage which roughly meant: As impossible as eating noodles out of a jug.

The man raised his calloused finger and

politely said, "Please wait there…" Like his son, he zipped back inside to find the proper person to deal with this.

Dusky was starting to feel the discomfort of pessimism; worried he'd wasted his one day on a wild goose chase.

The screen door hesitantly whinnied open. The spirited young mother of the household hopped to the edge of the stairs. "Are ya any relation ta the Daavidsons?"

Dusky smiled, not sure how to answer that for a second. "Yes and no. I was—I am, their first adoptive son."

She tossed her hands into the air with a humbled, "Vundahboah" and slapped her hips once. "Dei family-shtamm."

Dusky croaked, "I'm what-now?!"

The woman happily explained as she waved him up onto the porch. "The man that met ya is mei husband, and the son of Rosemary and Uther Daavidson."

Dusky shook the surreal from his head. "Hold on, that would make him my stepbrother…"

"Yau."

It took him a second or three; not because he couldn't remember that 'yau' meant yes. Dusky had to say it out loud to believe it himself, "You're my family?"

"Yau," she enthusiastically replied. "Ich binn Laura, un mei mann—" The wife and mother shot a stern glare through the screen door. Laura griped, "Uther?!"

Her husband groaned back out onto the porch. "Hello, I am Uther. Why are you coming here today?"

Laura unhappily quacked, "Uther!"

The two began calmly griping back and forth so fast even Dusky couldn't keep up.

He calmly interjected, "Please, I'm just here to talk to Jasiah and Rosemary. I'm not here to cause any trouble, I promise."

The couple's arguing ceased with their dire expressions.

Jasiah calmly explained, "I am sorry, they passed away 7 years ago."

Dusky felt flush and his skin clammy as the math just didn't add up in his head. He precariously swayed around the porch steps as he huffed, "But they weren't that old…"

Laura hummed, "Kumma-kumma, sit," as she carefully persuaded Dusky over to a nearby chair before he fell off their porch. She turned to the bravest boy peeking out of the screen door and urgently hissed, "Geddahra vassah."

Dusky continued speaking as though his breath had been drained before each word. "They can't—this isn't—supposed to go like this…"

This time, with a less self-concerned tone, Uther asked, "Why did you come here?"

Dusky shook his head in refusal. "How? They were healthy-it doesn't make sense. They need to be here! They're the only parents I have left!"

Laura went ahead and explained before the man's frustration got the best of him. "It was a storm. Caught Jasiah out in the field at The Farm. Rosemary was with him and it caught her the same. I'm so sorry."

The designated water-boy zipped up with a half-splashed out glass of water and held it up to Dusky.

He smiled as he realized the child had his father's stoic smile. "Thank you," Dusky said as he took the water and drank.

Laura gave the boy a pat on the back as

she rewarded him with her kind tone. "Eigay."

The boy happily hopped back inside to continue window-watching with his brothers and sisters.

Uther kindly suggested, "I could take ya to their graves, if ya like."

Daring Dusky took a deep breath and walked his path with truth. "I'd be honored, but you should know that I turned my back on this family long ago and have no right to be here. If you wish me to leave now, I'll gladly do so…"

The husband and wife took a second to let all that sink in before rolling into a gentle laughter.

Dusky croaked, "How is any of that funny?!"

Laura wisely suggested, "I think it best mei husband takes ya first ta The Farm…"



Dusky felt like a little kid riding to the market in a horse drawn carriage with his father again. He hadn't said much to his estranged brother, but he honestly didn't know what to say.

Thankfully, Uther was a straight-forward man with plenty on his mind. "From one man ta another, I need ta ask: What happened between ya and mei parents?"

Dusky sighed. "I spent 14 years living with them after my mother died, thought I might never leave at one time…"

"But ya did."

"Yeah, I did. It's because I didn't

have any faith; in them or their beliefs…"

Uther gave an understanding nod. "A man's faith is his foundation. I hope ya found yours."

Dusky smiled as he thought of Barter. "I did, I very much did. Found it in my son."

Uther let a chortle slip. "We're here." He pulled the buggy right up to the big engraved stone at the entrance; big metal words above the road reading: THE FARM.

Dusky walked up to the large stone with his stepbrother.

Uther motioned to the monolith. "Need mei ta read it for ya?

"No," Dusky distantly droned as he was already reading.

In English, the stone read:

In memory of Jasiah and Rosemary Daavidson,
Founders of The Farm.
"We do as we do for our 1st son who left us long ago. He reminded us there is a world outside of our own. So we do our best to honor that world for him."
~Jasiah and Rosemary Daavidson

Uther explained everything for his soul-searching stepbrother. "The Farm is a public garden that gives all its excess ta the neighboring towns and them food pantries feedin the poor there; among many a other things it does for the community."

Dusky walked up to it and read it again… There was no describing the medley of thoughts stirring in his head. Though sorrow was among them, Dusky felt happiness as he ran his fingers across the stone. He turned to Uther with a grin. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Uther gave a subtle nod. "You're welcome. As ya can see, ya did them more

good than ya coulda known."

Dusky laughed as guilt spewed out of him. "I tortured them about their religion nonstop, calling the idea of God a joke. They even called me the Devil at one point, when I got real bad…"

Uther sighed as he answered his own unanswered question. "Ya came here for redemption." Then he offered a helping hand for what the man sought. "Ya might want ta read there inscription at the bottom."

In English it read:

May our children's children be the final judges of our sins .

Dusky felt the weight of regret already lifting from him as he realized his adoptive folks felt the same as he did now; they had faith in their children. However, there was still one more stop to be had…



Dusky did as anyone would've done before the proof that he'd not a parent left in the world. He dropped to his knees before that proof, before Jasiah and Rosemary's graves. Dusky said the one thing he knew he must. "I am so sorry if I hurt you, and I promise to honor your memory the same as you have mine."

Uther heard only the words of a good man; the only kind of man he respected. "You're welcome ta join mei family for dinner. I'm afraid mei fraw would insist if she was here right now."

Dusky wiped a tear or two and rose a new man with a welcoming offer. He turned a gentle palm upon Uther's shoulder. "That sounds amazing. I mean, vunduhboah."

Uther nod and grin in agreement.

They made their way home with a new understanding of one another. Wisely spending the rest of the evening eating and overelaborating tales of life in the same house. Infectious joy of the modern device-less children as well as belly-filling food of only the homemade variety. These very things, coupled with board games, gave everyone in the house far more fulfillment than any electronic excess ever could.

Dusky was a bright pillar amongst this wonderful noise, stepping past the regret-skinned Devil of doubt that'd stolen his belief in himself. He was ready to return and be the father he never knew he could.

DAY 12
Daria's Do's and Don'ts

For Daria her day meant more than stepping past personal faults.

It meant facing the same kind of foe her family was already up against; a well-funded one. Also, it'd been a great reason for her to dress up a little from demeaning uniforms and rectangle name-tags.

Daria hated the smell of these "prestigious" halls, but she really loved her old red Salsa dress and the vivid blue shoulder-wrap she'd had since even before Dusky. The janitorial scent aroused all the forgotten anxiety of academia. But none of it stuck, because the only thing that mattered was the knife she brought with her…

Though a few students gave her sideways glances, the woman with a purpose had entered the "prestigious" college without a single halting hand.

Daria had no need for a map; her former fear of academia having imprinted one into her mind long ago. She took a deep breath as she approached the double doors. Though Daria's stern entrance got many a glances from the students filling the hall, including the kind-faced professor's, she took a quiet seat at the very back and waited.

The tenured professor cleared his throat and the interruption from his students. He was well-spoken, quick-minded, and exceedingly charismatic; and these were all things he made certain anyone that met

him knew right away. "Well," he lightheartedly projected, "I suppose late is better than never; end of class be damned.

Chuckles and chortles chattered the hall for a brief moment.

The professor continued; smart quick-minded be damned, because he'd no idea what part from his past awaited him today. "So, as further I'd like all of you to re-read chapters 4, 2, 8, and 12 of A Theory of Time. Within these chapters are the fundamentals in which your upcoming mid-term will be built around. …Well? Get out of here and go study you brilliant buncha bastards."

Students funneled out the doors as others happily and briefly chatted with the professor. Many of them swoon around the mentor of mentionable status, men and women alike.

It wasn't long before the hall was empty of all but the prestigious professor and a woman he'd yet to remember. He smiled and gently said, "Well, don't be shy." The professor waved her on down.

Daria smirked as she got up and walked to him, because she knew how much this brilliant bastard liked it when they did.

The professor's purposefully humble expression eased back into a straight face the closer she got. He curiously queried, "You're not one of my students, are you?"

"Not anymore," she said with stoicism.

The professor seemed less amused by the second. He strolled over to his podium and began organizing papers; a diminishing amount of ambivalence in his tone. "I see. Well then, I suggest you talk to the Dean if you're looking for a student."

Daria stayed strikingly stoic as she

walked up to the podium as well. "I came here only looking for you…"

His rifling ceased as he gave her a belittling brow-raise. A confident little smirk struck his face as he gave her a once over. "I'm flattered, but——"

"I'm not here to flatter you either," Daria interjected with a countering confidence. "I'm here to give something I meant to give you a long time ago…" She slung out the simple black knife from her wrap.

The professor croaked, "Whoa! Hold on!"

Daria swiftly stabbed the knife down into the podium right in front of her old professor! "I bought that twenty years ago, right after you—helped me with my low grade average. I was going to come back here and stick it in your neck, but now I've got something much worse to give you…"

The professor nervously gulped as all his quick-witted amounted for diddly squat. His well-spoken equally useless as he stammered, "Wh-What?"

Super Daria simply said, "Fear." Regular Daria sadistically explained, "Every time you think about '*helping*' one of these women you'll remember this knife, because somewhere out there there's a woman you 'helped' without my self-restraint. And I want you to lose sleep at night knowing that. Also, I plan on having you fired for your offenses against womankind; just for fun of course." Daria turned her back to the pain of her past and headed for the doors.

An overwhelmed professor slammed a fist against his podium and roared, "I am untouchable!" Saliva slung from his lips as he continued hollering. "There's nothing you

could ever do to me! You're just some nobody!"

Daria stopped, turned, and smiled at him as she replied, "Not for long." She left him with the exact things he'd left her with so long; fear and uncertainty. However, Daria wasn't done with her war path. She'd one last stop on the way home.



Despite the many stereotypes behind the public bus system, Daria had nary an awful experience. Aside from the rare jerk, her only real qualm was the ambient smell of feet and body odor that never really seemed to clear unless perched in one of the coveted window-seats. Daria was, unfortunately, seated on the edge and in the middle; prime odor area. Still, she smiled.

Her work-aged brow reached full crinkle as she simply couldn't fight her curiosity anymore. "Yer gonna have ta forgive me honey, but I gotta ask."

Daria turned to the heftier woman sitting beside her. "Yes?"

"Why do ya look so damn happy?" It wasn't until after the woman had asked that she'd heard the bitter in her own tone.

Only a second of shock struck Daria before she chuckled at her. "Sorry, I don't mean to laugh. It's just—I didn't realize I looked happy."

The woman gave her a smirking-wink. "Oh I see, ya got a sweetheart out there."

"No, quite the opposite actually. I just told off a son of a bitch that took advantage of me long ago."

The woman's expression teetered between

disbelief and amusement. "Well… Damn, you go girl. Did ya give em the old fashioned kick ta the dick?"

"Worse"—Daria leaned in and whispered—"I scared him like a little girl and then I crushed his ego like a bug."

The woman drew a few eyes as she unsuccessfully held back her laughter with snort-snippets. "Well aren't you just a *vicious* thing. How old are ya honey?"

"Too old."

"I hear that. My name's Rose."

That name exacerbated Daria's smile, because she'd always loved roses and apparently this one was no exception. "Daria."

"It's nice to meet someone on this damn bus that aint a drooling degenerate." Rose and the young man sitting in front of her shot each other an unpleasant glance. Inspired by her new friend, she said to him, "That's right, I'm talkin bout you; just keep that computer drug-pen-smoke out the window or I'll throw you out the window."

The young man's expression worried against the woman's stern one. Unlike his age and attire insisted, he wisely turned away and said nothing else.

Rose spicily sang, "*Ooh*-that was fun."

Daria laughed her ass off as quietly as she could.

With a needed smile on her face, Rose asked, "So where ya headin hon?"

"To go tell off some more pig-headed men," Daria replied without restraint.

Rose nodded with adamant approval. "The world needs more women like you."

Daria chuckled a little. "My dear Rose, you are a woman like me."



The recording room rumbled with their machismo; every pound of pride backed up by adorned precious metals and name brand clothes. Their male ruckus meandered away as most of the six men slowly turned to the caramel-brown haired woman closing the door behind her.

The loudest and flashiest of them standing at the front was the first to speak.

"Ya here for the 2 O'clock recording? Yer early."

Daria shook her head. "No. I'm here because when I was younger I came to this studio and was told I could be a star. And then I was treated like a whore and never became any star."

Until then, the midnight-eyed man sitting at the switch board hadn't even raised a bushy brow.

The flashy fool scoffed. "Ya need ta take that white ass O' yours and walk it the fuck outta here…" He lift his childishly-lengthy shirt and tapped the gun hanging from his sagging pants.

This time, Daria scoffed. "Don't be dumb, I'm not here to fight or argue or hurt anyone. I'm here to teach you boys a simple lesson your mother's should have."

A bunch of them burst into a dismissive laughter.

One of the heavier men griped, "Yo, how'd you even get in here?"

Daria pulled a sandwich bag from her purse and tossed it to the gun slinging simpleton. "My all natural, homemade

chocolate chip cookies got me in here."

The heavier man hummed, "Damn those look good."

The flashy man, now furious for no real reason, threw the cookies on the switchboard and bellowed at his buddy, "Shut the fuck up!" He spun around to Daria with a mouthful of foul words for her.

However, Daria's oh-so-subtle and sudden slap upon his cheek silenced him and the room. "You watch your mouth and mind your manners young man; those cookies are for everyone."

The flashy fool's face turned redder than it should've been able to. He loomed at her, shoulders aggressively held back and chest puffing out.

An unmovable Daria politely cleared her throat and said, "Do you really think beating up a 40 year old mother is gonna make you look cool to your friends?"

He backed up a little in a fury, flash jangling about. Consistent with the title of fool, he crookedly pulled his gun and held it sideways; an improper and idiotic weapon-handling technique. His mouth opened wide when a bling-heavy backhand blasted across his face!

The midnight-eyed man yanked the weapon from the flashy fool's grasp as he withdrew his ring-lined hand.

The felled fool croaked, "What the fuck Big D!?"

His deep voice gruffly graced the air for the first time in hours as he growled, "Shut up before I pistol whip your faggot ass, boy. Serious, I'll drop ya lil bitch ass off at ya mama's ta whoop ya right."

Fury gone amongst his flash, he bowed

out to the dangerous studio owner without another word.

The midnight-eyed man took a big bite of cookie. "Them are damn good cookies. I'd say they buy ya bout 5 minutes O' my time. So please make your point real quick…" He continued eating cookies.

Daria had no problem with that trade. "I'm here to get you to join my gang." She let them all have their brief moment of laughter, ended by Big D's stern snap and a cookie-full hand wave for her to continue. "I'm not kidding." She pulled out a simple homemade print-out from her purse and put it in Big D's free hand.

Half-chewed bite, he read, "Cookies for Couches?"

"That's right. I'm starting a group that brings a dozen cookies, once a week, to any production agency willing to pledge that they will throw away their casting couches and treat female artists with respect."

Big D plainly inquired, "You gonna mama the whole damn production industry?"

Super Daria exuded confidence. "Someone has to."

Big D tossed the rest of the cookie bag to his chubby pal. "You better share them like the lady said, Fatty."

Daria sighed. "I suppose my times about up then."

Big D shook his head. "Nah, first ya gonna tell me why I should back up some white-bread mama from suburbia?"

Daria dropped it hard and true. "First of all, I don't live in suburbia nothin; all I got is gunshots and sirens outside my window at night. And second of all, I aint like any mama you ever seen, because I gotta

kid who aint like anything anyone has ever seen. And we're gonna change the world into something all our mamas would be proud of."

Big D stood there in an ominous silence for moment, ideals and identity intermingling in his self-defining intermission. "My mama was a cold bitch, but she taught me respect"—he gestured to his crew—"But thugs like us are too busy tryin ta save face and we forget that shit."

One of the crew with sunglasses let his tongue slip. "Shit Big D, you can't be seriously thinkin bout helpin this crazy white girl?"

Big D smacked the glasses clean off his face! He barked at him, "When was the last time I made a joke bitch! Now go call your fuckin mama and do anything she wants!"

The shocked thug stammered, "A-Are you serious?"

Big D bellowed, "Bitch! I will backhand you again! Now go call her! Now!"

He grabbed his glasses from the floor as he fumbled his phone from his pocket, stumbling out the door with vigor.

Big D turned to the rest of them and droned, "Anyone else think bein nice to their mamas is a fuckin joke?"

They all shook their heads as many of them jabbered in vigorous agreeance.

The oddity of Fatty's words cut through as he said, "My mama makes me apple pies and I give her foot rubs."

Everyone turned to their big bear of a member in silent disbelief.

Big D ignored the shrugging Fatty along with the rest of them and slowly extended his hand to Daria. "You got a deal."

She gladly shook his huge hand as she

handed him a dozen bag of cookies from her purse. "And you get these cookies."

Big D smiled wider than he'd smiled in months.

"Well," Daria happily hummed, "I should get going."

Big D smirked. "Off ta bigger and better things, huh Mama-C?"

She assumed the C stood for cookie. "Yup, I still got cookies and people still need a mama."

Bid D nodded. "I'll see ya next week then, and just let me know if ya ever wanna get on that mic and rip a song."

This time Daria was the one with the month-wide smile. "You know, I just might take you up on that." She left that studio with her chin held high, the exact same thing she's hoping all women that leave here can do. Daria had proactively changed her world. For better or worse still had yet to be seen, but with a little hope for the future and faith in a fellow human being anything is possible. She knew this in the bottom of her heart, and she was ready to be a star for her son.

DAY 12
Barter's Bane Vs Opol's Opinion

Barter grimaced upward at Opol as they walked through the grass. "Barter thought we were all supposed to do our *own* quest kinda thingy?"

Opol chuckled. "My dear boy, I started doing that the very day I left the monastery with your family. And besides, your mother was not okay with you coming here alone."

Barter's nostrils flared with a defeated huff. "Well he thinks you're kind of a know-it-all."

The monk burst into a chortle, stopping their stride as he took a moment to enjoy the irony of his joy in such a place. He continued their walk as he said, "Though this is not the first time I have been accused of such, it is the first time an 8 year old has accused me of such; not that the insult lacks merit"

"I know, Barter's weird…"

Without skipping a beat, Opol replied, "Call it what you want. It is one of your most wonderful of qualities."

Barter beamed. "Thank you."

Their stroll continued for a minute before they both stopped yet again, but this time it was because of mutually being lost.

Opol rubbed his chin. "Let us see, this looks like the area. I believe he said it was row 23."

Barter shook his head. "What about the

letter?"

"What letter?"

"The letter J."

"Like in an alphabet?"

Barter nodded.

"Huh… Well then, it appears we are lost."

He sighed. "Yeah, Barter thought so too." The 8 year old could see the wise monk already deeper in thought than was needed to navigate a cemetery. So he took command. "That way," Barter said with a confident finger-point.

"That way?" Opol reiterated with a curious eyebrow.

"Yes, that way."

The monk of infinite wisdom did an amazing thing, he shrugged off his thoughts. "Okay, lead the way."

Barter did just that; not that he knew the way.

A few zig-zags and moments of impromptu jogging later, and they were still lost.

Opol suggested, "We should head back and ask them to write down the directions for us."

Barter was already looking at the place they needed to be, even though it wasn't the place they were trying to go. "Barter thinks we need to take a de-tort."

"I am certain you mean detour."

"Yeah-that." Without further explanation, he continued his stride over to an elderly woman sitting in a walker.

The woman just solemnly stared at the grave before her, frizzy blanch hair reminiscent of her pale skin.

"Hello," Barter politely said.

Opol added, "Good day to you ma'am."

She ignored the both of them.

Barter decided on a different approach. "This Opol, he's a super-smart monk with Kung-Fu. And Barter's name is Barter, and he has the superpower to make the world different."

The elderly woman slowly looked up at the young man for that one. Her glaucoma-faded green eyes did a double-take. She hoarsely harped, "I don't want none a yer religion. Go away."

"Barter doesn't have any religion to give, mostly because he thinks all that stuff is far too confusing to help people; like poetry that goes on too long."

Opol did his best to hold back his grin, watching the woman's defensive demeanor melt away.

The woman cleared her throat and hummed, "You're an odd young man… Is there something wrong with you?"

How Opol loved watching this whimsical youth step past the walls and woes of others with simple honesty.

Barter replied, "Kind of, he has Asperger and a dead grandpa."

The woman chattered on without even thinking. "Oh, I see. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Barter's sorry for your loss too."

The woman turned a sad grin back to the grave. "We were together 67 years. He's been gone for only 2 and… I'd like to be left alone now, please…"

Opol put the pieces together; the slight tatter to her clothes and sprinkler-made water spots upon her walker said she'd been there a while. So he spoke her truth for her, something he'd done many a times

before. "You came here to die."

The woman didn't react; content with her choice she'd no reason to justify it.

Barter glanced back and forth between the two annoyingly vague adults. "Well Barter doesn't like that idea at all."

Opol sternly suggested, "We should go. Sorry to bother you, ma'am."

"No," Barter refused with his own sternness. "I'm gonna help this lady."

The woman turned a wide smile to him. "You're a sweet boy. Don't waste your time with me, go be sweet to someone else." She gave him a loving pat on the shoulder.

"Barter thinks everyone deserves to live."

Opol took that one with a swift tongue. "It is the same for death. We all deserve to decide when, how, and why we leave this world." He then dropped a gruff, "Now let us leave her alone out of respect."

Barter unhappily chirped, "But there's rules about stuff and laws and stuff that says letting people die is bad."

Opol forgot he was talking to an 8 year old for a second. "All legality involving the right to die when you wish exists to serve the interests of others that are not those dying; a testament to the self-serving nature of what people inaccurately refer to as justice, but is nothing more than a monetary construct created to keep those with monetary means free from the reach of said justice."

Barter croaked, "What!?"

The woman had to second that. "Yeah-I'm with the kid, what?"

Opol greatly simplified his answer. "All laws are made without consideration for

the exceptions to them."

The 8 year old and the 98 year old both understandingly cooed, "*Oh*."

"Yes. You see, as long as people let their fears subjugate their behavior——"

"Please-no," she huffed in interruption. "Spare this old bag the big words." The woman's underlying amusement let her truth slip from her lips this time. "Please, I just wanna sit here in peace with him until I'm gone. Please, I don't wanna die in a retirement home; none of us ever do. Please?"

Opol and Barter both nodded, the monk saying, "We are sorry to have bothered you, and we wish you the best."

They turned and walked away.

But a dozen steps in and Brave Barter burst back over to the woman. He huffed, "Isn't there anything Barter can do to make you wanna live and be happy?"

She placed her hand on the boy's cheek. The woman's eyes welled-up with love as she realized the boy had his same creamed-coffee eyes. "You wonderful, sweet, adorable boy. I already lived a long life with lots and lots of happy."

"Oh…" Barter suddenly felt really sad.

The woman was no stranger to motherhood and intuitively explained, "It's okay to be sad. It just means you know how to care."

Barter adamantly nodded.

She gave him an insistent nudge away. "Now go, be sweet some more. People need more sweet."

Barter asked, "Can he at least know your name?"

The woman smiled and said, "It's Anna."



"Why do people put so many flowers on graves?" Barter inquired out of nowhere.

Opol shrugged. "I do not know. Symbolism?"

Barter shrugged. "I dunno…wait, you don't know something?"

Opol chuckled. "There is lots of things I do not know."

"Like what?"

"Hmm—I do not know how to make a burrito."

Barter snort-laughed. "That's a silly thing not to know."

"None the less, I do not know it."

"Don't worry, Barter's gonna show you how to make a good burrito."

"Thank you."

"Your verkleum… Huh?"

Opol's feather soft palm enveloped the boy's shoulder, steadying him before he fell over. "Are you okay?"

Barter took a deep breath and dawned a humbled grin. "Yup, just tasted like the color of apples and felt dizzy for a second. Maybe Barter needs more vitamins or something?"

"Maybe… We have been wandering around for a long while, perhaps some food would be a good idea? I brought honey-rice cakes that I—"

Barter's face fell flat as he pointed just to the left of them in interruption. "There…"

They'd finally found it, Barter's grandfather's grave.

Opol had to ask, "How do you know it is

his?"

Barter walked up and lifted a penny from the top of the grave. "Barter put a heads-up penny on top of it when he was here after Grandpa's funeral-church thing; for good luck."

The monk had to know, "Why is it considered a token of luck?"

"I dunno, Grandpa always said that finding a heads-up penny was good luck. He never asked why…"

Opol could see the regret grow in the boy's eyes. "Perhaps the why doesn't matter? Maybe simply believing it is lucky makes it lucky?"

He smiled up at Opol. "Barter likes that idea a lot."

They both stood there for a quiet moment after that.

"Barter doesn't know how to talk to dead people," he whispered for some reason.

The monk gladly explained the finite yet complex art of talking to those that've become the past. "Speak as if they were standing before you, and imagine them the same. Do this, and those who have died will never be lost to you."

"…Got it." Barter turned to the grave and spoke his truth. "Hey Grandpa, Barter misses you. And he's done lots of different since you—Barter even stood up to fancy political adults. He…used to not listen to anyone… Barter used to only hear himself…"

Opol was shocked by a child heading down a path of self-understanding that takes most decades; he was no exception. He dared not utter a word within this moment, letting Barter be who he was and wished to become.

"But now he listens to *everyone*. And

he's stopped saying his life out loud, he's—he's not reeta-*re*iterating his life anymore. And he got a dictionary. Anyways, Barter"—he leaned in at the grave and whispered—"He already used some treasure to make things better."

Opol's keen ears found him in a place too curious not to inquire, "What treasure?"

Barters quick wit and dictionary-dolloped mind leapt to the defense. "Well, it is like—a—metabol-meta-*metaphorical*…"

"Ah, I see. How did you use a metaphor to make things better?"

Unfortunately for Barter's quick wit, he was a bad liar. "I, um, have no idea…"

Opol sternly crossed his arms. "I do not appreciate being lied to by my friend."

A big, dismissive smile eased across Barter's face. "You called me your friend."

Opol grinned. "Do not deflect from the topic."

"*Fine*," he groaned. "Barter, may have, possibly, maybe his Grandpa gave him *a*—kinda of a—big-pile-of-money-he hid in his floor vent…oh-but you can't tell his family yet cause it won't helpful till later…"

Opol's mouth opened, but nothing came out. He instead pressed a palm up against his chin as he gave a 'hmm' or two in thought. "Well, that honestly is not surprising."

"What!?" Barter squawked as he found his own shock. "Why!?"

Opol gladly explained. "Well, you are an 8 year old child who has actively changed his world; a feat rarely accomplished by most adults. I just assumed there was something I did not understand or know about

that was aiding your efforts."

Barter jestingly shook his head at his monk friend. "Know-it-all."

"So I have heard." He grew a worried brow-crinkle. "I feel compelled to tell you that such things as money cannot truly change the world for the better."

"But you just said I made the world better." Barter huffed.

"No, I said you changed the world. There is a big difference."

"And what is that?"

"Better can only be determined by those that are not the ones trying to make better. And changing something never means others will get better from it; no matter how heartfelt the thing that is done."

Barter was the one now wearing the worried brow-crinkle. He sighed, "He knows Opol's right… But he also thinks he's wrong."

The monk chuckled with conversational enthuse. "Please, explain this concept to me further."

"*Well*, Barter sometimes thinks really smart people can't see really dumb things. Like how you can't make a burrito but you can Kung-Fu."

Opol's eyes widened. "That is—insanely insightful…"

"Barter's not sure that's a compliment…"

"Everything about you is compliment to this existence my boy."

Barter beamed, "Thank you. And he's sorry for lying to you; that's not what friends do."

Opol nervously cleared his throat as he averted his eyes ever-so-slightly. "Yes-

well, that is indeed true…"

"Oh-my-gosh," Barter blurted when he saw it as clear as day on the monk's visage. "You're totally acting like Barter does when he has a secret."

Opol tiredly dropped his face into his palm. "Oh my astute boy…" He looked Barter in the eyes and said, "As a true friend who cares greatly about your being, I will not be telling you my secret right now. Rice cake?" He held out a small cloth bag of green rice cakes.

"Why?!" Barter unhappily whined as he crunched down on a cake per his belly's grumbling will. "That's so not fair-cause I told you my secret!" He angrily crunched some more.

"I know, and I am very sorry. I will tell you my secret one day, but only when telling it is the most helpful or does not matter at all."

Barter loved the dramatic appeal behind that idea. "You promise?"

Opol seriously said, "You have my word as a monk and a man."

"Cool. So what do you think, Grandpa? *Oh right*, you're dead…"

The monk found it quite difficult not to chortle at that. "Dead or not, it seems you've gotten the hang of talking to him."

Barter pepped up a little. "Hey you're right. You hear that, Grandpa? Barter can talk to you even if you were a zombie."

Opol wasn't sure about that one, but he let Barter have his moment anyways. Because he knew the boy deserved every moment for the flood of goodness and wonder that he was.

"Well, Barter and Opol have to go and

change the world with politics, like the adults always complain about. Oh, and this is Opol, he's my Kung-Fu monk friend."

Opol politely bowed at the headstone. "It is nice to meet you."

Barter's eyes abruptly welled up with tears of regret. He fought against his sobbing as he said, "I'm really sorry I didn't listen to you earlier Grandpa. And I promise I'm gonna find a way to help everyone listen like they need to and live like you didn't. Barter just wants you to know that…"

Opol placed a kind hand upon his shorter friend's shoulder. "I am certain he does."

"How?"

Opol burst into laughter. "I must say, I am thoroughly enjoying how you ask the questions that no one else will."

"Thank you, but you didn't answer Barter's question."

They shared a friendly smirk and a rice cake crunch in jest.

Opol simply said, "I suppose you will just have to trust me."

Barter raised a quizzical squint as he thought. "Okay, Barter will trust you."

Opol gave a light bow. "I am honored."

Barter turned back to his Grandfather's grave and unburdened a hefty sigh as he let regret go. He then smiled with hope for the future. "Barter thinks he's ready. Thank you for everything you ever did for him Grandpa. Goodbye."

Opol met the stride of the old-souled leader in the body of a quirky 8 year old. Something he was beyond thankful for having the chance to do.

Barter crunched down again and griped, "These are gross, Opol."

Opol laughed.

They walked with their chins high and purposes plentiful; right to the nearest source of junk-food that is. However, vending machine snacks comprised mostly of toxic sugars and salts didn't do much to fuel the two vagabonds of valor. After throwing away their vile vending machine munchies and returning to crunching on green rice cakes, Opol and Barter's easing tummy rumbles said they were actually ready. The monk and magnanimous young man a formidable force of wisdom and difference, but currently on lunch break at the local diner.

DAY 12

Avengers of Altruism! Assemble!

The night was well set-in around the neighborhood; local feral druggies and cats wandering the dark corners the same. Too dark to be in the A.M. and too late not to be.

The drone of Dusky's van carried well over the simple sounds about.

Keys dangling an inch from the doorknob, Daria turned around and left the door locked. She smiled at that ugly van she used to hate so much.

Dusky dropped the shifter into park with great impatience, caused by the long-looming gaslight. "I can't believe I actually made it back…" He lovingly patted the steering wheel. "Good girl. I owe you an oil change."

Daria jumped when the door opened behind her. "Oh my—! Windella?! How'd you get inside?"

"Used a window-but before you get mad you should know that I cleaned up inside for you."

Daria dropped a hand on her shoulder. "You're the best girl. I honestly can't remember the last time someone else besides me cleaned up anything."

Windy blushed a little. "It was nothin. I got here like an hour ago and couldn't sleep without you guys around anyways…"

Daria gave her a cheek-pinch too quick

for her to protest. "If you don't stop being so cute I'm gonna have to adopt you."

Goth Windy awkwardly leapt at the unexpected opening. "Yeah-huh-funny-speaking of which, um, here…"

Daria had waited in enough family court crevices to know a legal document when she saw one. She carefully took the paper, feeling like there was no way this could be what she was thinking it could be.

Dusky beamed at the two of them, speaking as he approached. "I can't tell you both how wonderful it is to see your—mildly perturbed faces… What's up?"

Daria wanted to answer, but the fact of the matter was that she didn't know for sure. She unfolded the stapled together stacks of paper and read for a few seconds. Super Daria swallowed her disbelief with a hearty gulp. "Well, apparently Windella here wants me to adopt her as my daughter…"

"*Oh*," Dusky boldly droned. "That is a very big deal."

Daria simply had to ask, "Why me? I mean, I'm beyond flattered, but I'm no prize as a mom. And anyways, you'd have to get your real mother to sign her rights away and that—"

"I already did," Windy calmly explained.

Daria glanced at the other wad of papers. "Holy crap, you did… You're like, serious-serious…" She drifted right back to her initial question. "Why me?"

Dusky's mouth stayed shut as he wisely let Windy fit the broken puzzle piece that was her into the broken little puzzle that was his family.

"That's easy," Goth Windy matter-of-

factly hummed, "Because you're the kind of mother I'd want to be." Windella's eyes welled up a little as she spoke from the heart. "Not some fairytale TV sitcom crap, but a real woman with real flaws that she owns. A woman willing to take brave steps I could've never taken in a million years. And—and I just don't wanna be anywhere else but here with you and your family…"

Daria skipped not a second between Windy's fallen tear, wrapping her arms around her. "Oh my dear girl, this is already your family too."

Windella tightly hugged her back.

Daria's voice cracked a little with love. "And there's nothing in this world that'd make me happier than being your mother."

Dusky wrapped his arms around the both of them and mooched a group hug. "Sorry, had to get in on the love."

They both subtly shrugged and let him squeeze the two of them tighter together.

Daria broke the hug as she suddenly realized, "Has anyone seen Barter?"

"He is sleeping," Opol suddenly said with a snoozing Barter dangling over his arms.

They all jumped a little.

Dusky huffed, "Dude, much respect to your ninja skills."

"Thank you?" Opol wasn't sure being compared to murderous assassins from the feudal era was a compliment.

Windy asked, "How long were you standing there?"

The monk smiled wide. "Long enough to see something beautiful."

Daria point a reprimanding finger at

Opol. "Now you stop being cute or I'll adopt you too."

Opol chortled along with the laughter of the others.

Barter's half-open, squinty-eyed face arose from Opol's chest. "Barter's funny now?"

Daria darted up to her boy, cooing as she scooped the grumbling young man into her arms. "*Oh*, who's my grumbly lil man?"

Barter fidgeted and fumed, "*No mom*. Barter's not a baby."

Daria gave him a big smacking kiss on the forehead. "Damn, you are getting heavy." She gently sat him down.

Barter awkwardly wobbled a few times. "Ugh, Barter hates purple, and he's in a motorcycle gang now."

Dusky had to no choice but to ask, "You're in what now?"

Opol explained in lieu of the nearby parental figures' widening eyes. "It is a motorcycle church gang that volunteers serving food to those that need it once a week; we just happened to be eating in the same diner with them, and then we volunteered with them."

Windy said, "I'm betting we all have a few stories to tell, but maybe we should go inside where there's couches?"

"I second that." Daria threw her arm around her new daughter. "Plus we can get me a pen and get this piece of paper signed up."

"Barter has no idea what's happening right now…"

Daria proudly explained, "This is gonna let me adopt Windella as a daughter, and your new sister."

Barter rubbed his eyes as he dawned a confused grimace. "But Goth Windy was already his sister."

Windy's face flooded with love as she lifted the boy off the ground and into a death-grip of a hug.

Barter promptly replied, "Ack! You're making Barter feel yellow!"

She sat him down and mimicked his confused grimace. "Yellow? Is that like a peeing your pants thing?"

"*No*," Barter croaked. "It's like he's tired and everything is oogy…" Luckily for Windy, he turned to the side for the quick puke that struck him.

Daria and Dusky simultaneous asked, "Are you okay?"

Barter unhelpfully answered, "Ew, it tastes like vanilla and farts."

Opol tried to swiftly dissolve their worries. "He did eat a lot of ice cream."

Everyone mutually agreed it was time to leave the unpleasantly colorful puddle and go inside. Tired rambles soon filled the living room as everyone picked their seat to plop into; Barter giving his teeth a quick brush first. For a good few minutes. They all just looked around at one another, understanding eyes and lovingly puckering cheeks all around.

Barter's big yawn broke them all into a wave of their own yawns followed by a short laughter.

Daria groaned, "On that note, I'm going to bed." She slumped over and popped up to a stand. "I love all of you, please go to bed, and will someone please make sure the front door is closed and locked."

Windy and Dusky locked eyes and dropped

a finger atop their noses at the same time. Since Barter was snoring and out-cold, the two smirked at Opol.

He gave a giving little bow. "I will check the door. Please, I insist you head to bed and rest."

Dusky flopped over the entirety of the couch, face dug into pillows as he grumbled, "Done and done."

Opol took a few steps towards the door before he was stopped by Windy's gentle hand on his shoulder. "Yes?"

"Sorry, I just wanted you to know, before I forgot and fell asleep, I just—I just wanted to say thank you for everything."

Opol was overwhelmed with a stoic shock as Windy hugged him like the brother she'd never had.

"Goodnight," she hummed as she tiredly walked away to find some dreams.

Opol went to the door as he said he would, letting himself soak in the feeling of acceptance. He looked out into the day still darkened by early. A tear streaked down the side of Opol's cheek and he smiled as he closed the door on a gloriously different day, knowing that such a thing alone would make way for a better future.

DAY 13
Wrongs of the Righteous

Mayor Mark Michaelson tediously tapped his fingertips upon his chair's mahogany armrest. He kept his dirt-eyed glare on the recently broken flat-screen TV dangling from the wall at the far end of the meeting room table.

Annabelle the advisor strolled through the door and tilt down her glasses to the busted TV. "Right, anyways. The—"

"Anyways what!?" The Mayor rudely barked in interruption. "I'm fucked! Polling at five god damn percent!"

"As I was saying," she continued without hiccup, "The rest of our little legion should be arriving soon. Also, I wouldn't waste the energy throwing a fit like you."

Mark's glare crept over to his advisor.

Not once in Annabelle's life had any man ever fazed her with a simple look; this moment was no exception. "There's bigger things to worry about here than polling, and I think you know that…"

Mark sat back in his chair and tiredly mashed up his grimace with his hands. "Any word from those federal dogs yet?"

"None, but you know how they love to show up without an appointment. I hate it when people show up without an appointment."

The Mayor gave a sigh of detest unto the humbled feeling he felt. "Why're you so damned relaxed?! You do know that officer is still missing?! If they find him he could—"

"Do nothing," Leland the Lawyer interjected, pulling his bald, pug-faced head away from his laptop for two seconds.

Annabelle squeaked, "Was he here the whole time?"

Mark sarcastically spat, "Maybe the fat Jew's superpower is *invisibility*. What do you think, Captain-Bubblehead?"

Annabelle asked the dourly dark-eyed Leland, "Is he always this much of an ass when he screws up?"

Leland puffed a gruff chortle. "Bigger, usually." He smirked over at the glare-glazed Mark. "He's holding back…"

The Mayor grimaced at the two of them. "*Great*, so glad I got you two manipulative psychopaths talking…"

"As your lawyer, I suggest—"

"Oh stuff it," Mark interrupted. "You're no more a man of the law than I am a saint."

Annabelle chirped, "There's not a person in this room capable of being considered lawful."

The Colonel's keen ears apprised him to the situation ahead. His bushy gray brow bustled about in displeasure. With each silent step he took in well-worn combat boots, his already stern visage further soured. "They sound like bickering children…" He ruggedly rasped to himself.

Their bickering and bitching burped to an end as the door swung open.

All six and a half feet of short gray hair, black Italian suit, and green eyes that was the Colonel loomed over them like big-brother with a baseball bat.

Annabelle beamed, "Uncle Biff!"

An unexpected grin leapt across the

crass Colonel's face as his niece wrapped her arms around him, giving her a reserved pat or two in return. "So these are the idiots you've chosen to work for?"

Annabelle shrugged. "What can I say, I like a challenge."

Mayor Mark did as his name insisted. "Mayor Mark Michaelson. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Colonel."

"Is it now?" He replied with a deepened tone and a handshake, cracking a few of the Mayor's fingers as he shook it.

Mark withdrew his hand with a pained flail or two. "That's a Hell of a grip you got there, chief."

The Colonel decided blatancy best. "Make no mistake, if not for my niece, I would sit back and watch your career burn with the rest of the pompous politicians."

Leland let a chuckle slip.

Mayor Mark's welcoming expelled from his expression, replaced by the vulgar sneer that was himself. "I don't give a shit for your reasons. This problem is much bigger than just this *pompous politician*. Do I make myself clear, chief?"

The Colonel calmly said, "Explain to me why a loud-mouthed little retard is such a *big* problem."

Leland leapt up from his corner. "I believe I can answer that one."

The Colonel dismissively droned, "And why would I listen to a legal puppet like you?"

"Because I'm the best damn, *generously-paid*, legal puppet you've ever met."

The Colonel grumbled and nodded. "Proceed."

Leland sat down at the big table,

pulled a suitcase from beneath it, and popped it open. He dropped the thumb-thick file atop the table and flung it open. "In here is everything this *'little retard'*, as you so poignantly stated, has done. And every damn time I sit down and *peruse* through it, I realize that the monetary governing structure, people like us depend upon, keeping order and peace is steadily being undermined. There apparently is even some sort of site dedicated to *'being brave'* in the face of *'corruption and lies'*. It already has over 2000 local users within the span of a day."

The Colonel curiously cusped his chin as he took a seat and flipped through the file. A baritone chuckle arose from his chest, his face growing stern before any could inquire unto his humor. He flipped the thing closed and dismissively shoved it back towards Leland. "You damn lawyers, all you see is the facts and think you know everything. This *boy* is obviously using unknown means to manipulate the world around him."

Leland leapt into the logistics. "There's no facts to back that up, most likely the child is being lead on by one of the parents or this supposed diplomat; there's also a dark-dressed young woman that may or may not have affiliations with known methamphetamine dealers."

Just for fun, the now sitting Annabelle raised her hand and said, "I vote that one."

"Don't be daft," Mark insulted without thinking as the Colonel gave him a gruff glance in warning.

The Colonel commandingly cleared his throat. "First of all, an 8 year old boy who

can cause this much media exposure is not some child to be underestimated. And second of all, Opol Addanoholjai is a real ambassador and a very big problem. Lastly—"

"Hold the heck on," Mark quacked. "Are you telling me this hobo looking hippie is a *real* ambassador?!"

The Colonel's warning glare grew leaner and longer this time.

Annabelle tossed the tedious-mouthed man a bone. "As your advisor, Mr. Mayor, you should know that the Colonel is not fond of interruptions."

Mark swallowed his pride. "Forgive me Colonel, these are—trying times for me. Please continue."

The Colonel kept the silence of the room for longer than needed; just to make sure he'd their undivided attention. "Lastly, there is already a solid system in place to squelch idealists, like this boy and those that follow him, before they undermine our democracy and create a socialist revolution. Although it may require a scapegoat after the mess that was made here…"

Mark harked, "Why is everyone looking at me?!"

The Colonel continued. "Trust me, these loud locals always take a seat back where they belong once they've gotten whatever whining they needed to out of their system."

Leland the Lawyer had to say, "You can't be a 100% certain of that."

The Colonel's head hobbled a humbled tilt as he said, "Yes-yes, leave it up to a lawyer to remind us all about the 1%…"

Annabelle giggled. "Clever one, Uncle."

"Thank you."

Mark the Mayor's demeanor calmed as he leaned back in his chair, realizing his options sucked but would at least keep him out of jail. "Fine, worst case scenario I'm willing to bow out of the race for *personal family issues* or whatever sounds good."

The Colonel did his best not to scoff at the big-headed bureaucrat. "What sounds good is politicians not mucking up the country I've killed to keep…"

Mark humbly cleared the uppity from his throat in the face of the Colonel's uncomfortably long glare. "Forgive me sir. I underestimated my enemy."

Leland, Annabelle, and even the Colonel were shocked he'd said that.

"So," Mark went on, "What can we do to ensure this boys uprising fails?"

The Colonel looked around at their readied eyes, giving a near-silent 'hmph' in pleasant surprise of their underlying unification. "Okay then, listen well. I have an associate that can handle this website with ease, so leave that to me. The Mayor will stay here and do nothing."

Mark jerked about his seat. "What? Why?!"

Annabelle answered that one quicker than her Uncle could. "It's the best way to avoid any of those pesky legal questions that you're culpable for, and lean the media coverage the way we want of course."

"Correction," Leland teasingly jested, "May or may not be culpable for."

The Colonel smiled at his granddaughter. "Well done Annabelle."

"Thank you," she chipperly squeaked in spite of her cold demeanor.

The Colonel's sterner expression

returned like a dropping hammer. "That means you two need to aid one another in flooding the media with negative perceptions of this boy and his allies; be sure to use third party distributors to avoid any personal connection. Do the same as you locate this missing officer and have him thrown in the darkest prison hole you can find. After that, we will watch and wait for our opening."

They all nod mumbled agreeing sounds as they glanced around at one another in mutual certainty of the commanding man's plan.

The Colonel took a big breath in as he fell a warning upon them. "I don't need to tell all of you how imperative it is that you act with the utmost caution; though just a boy, his ideals intend to undermine the monetary strength that this society depends upon for protection. A leadership comprised of average Joes is no better than an anarchy; whether it city, state, or country."

Leland felt full well that he was right. "True. Without those of greater means to apply control, those of lesser means would burn through the economy like locust."

"Yes," Mark proudly said, "I am very sure we can all agree on that one; Socialism is suicide."

The Colonel loudly grunted in agreeance. "Indeed. These are not the first loud-mouthed liberals I've had to silence and I'm sure they will not be the last."

Annabelle gleefully boasted, "Damn right, Uncle Biff is the best. He took care of these red-state radicals trying to get me tried as an adult for attempted murder." She casually clarified unto the couple shocked

faces, "Oh-I just poisoned my teacher a little in 7th grade, but she was a bitch."

The Colonel deeply chortled. "Oh my dear Belle, I would not make a habit of telling that story."

Leland added, "As legal counsel, I strongly advise that as well."

Annabelle shared her uncle's chortle. "*Yeah*, hindsight is a bitch."

Mark the Mayor hated that saying with a passion. "Fuck hindsight. I say we steamroll over the whole damn thing so the past is as flat as the future we decide to make."

"Bold speech," the unimpressed Colonel scoffed. "But only a fool burns the fields he may need to tend. So once again, you will do nothing."

Mark took a pained breath deep in and out. "I understand, and thank you."

The Colonel nod in respect of the Mayor's humility; self-serving or not. "You should thank yourself, because somewhere in this mess you caused you've managed to wisely pick Annabelle as an advisor."

She proudly raised her chin; her confidence as solid-state as ever.

"With that said, Mr. Mayor," the Colonel crassly continued. "I am not your advisor nor your legal counsel, and I am most certainly not being paid. So, I ask you, what is my compensation for the skills I bring to this little quartet?"

A devious grin meandered over Mayor Mark's visage. "Tell them about the campaign Leland."

Leland the lawyer laughed a little first. "Well, in spite of this ridiculous debacle, our good Mayor Mark here has a sure fire seat in The Senate waiting for him;

it's all set-up via off-shore accounts filtered through non-profit organizations into *'donations'* for voting registries, also the guarantee of loosening on specific import and export laws and of course the agreement of the very person of who's seat he'll be occupying."

Mark crassly stated, "And I'm sure, Biff, that you can agree we all need more men like me, willing to do as men like you ask of them, while sitting in those pesky political seats."

A gruff laughter steadily rose from the Colonel's chest into a refined chuckle. "I now understand why Annabelle let you employ her." He held out his hand to Mark. "I fully agree to this trade of services. Well played."

"Thank you sir." Mark shook that hand, ignoring the fact that the Colonel could crush his like it were made of crackers; racist white-people pun a happy accident.

As the bonds grew stronger amongst this group of righteous-minded monsters, they did what many a 'great' leaders had done before them; they justified whatever atrocities necessary for <u>their</u> better future.

DAY 13
Sick Day Deliberations

Daria felt the once prominent anxiety of having slept-in now easing away into the back of her consciousness as it lost all meaning to her. Instead, she slowly opened her eyes to the clock on her nightstand. "Is it really past nine?" She grumbled to herself.

Windy gladly grumble-griped an inaudible response, immediately going back to sleep.

Daria sat up and looked at the blanket thieves sleeping beside her. Seeing her son and new daughter snoozing away like clingy cousins made Daria forget about her chilly toes and fingers. She silently slid out of bed, not taking her eyes off of them for a second. Her tiredly wayward feet carried her past a crookedly unconscious Dusky on the couch and into the kitchen.

For the next few minutes the woman turned into a smirk and flared nostrils, inhaling the aroma from brewing the non-certified organic coffee; sure it was a little overpriced, but damn it tasted good.

Daria's eyes opened a little wider as the mechanical hum of brewing fizzled to an end, glancing around in search of her monk babysitter. She reached to the back of a cupboard, pulling out her coconut rum and filling a third of a cup before putting it back. With a heaping spoonful of sugar, cold milk, and coffee filling the rest of the cup, she took a big body-relaxing sip and

sighed herself awake.

"Do you often drink alcohol first thing in the morning?" Opol inquired as he watched out the living room window.

Daria glanced side to side and up and down before realizing he wasn't even in the kitchen. "What the?! How the heck do you even know that from out there?! And why're you peeking out of a crack in my curtains like a wacko?!"

Opol started with the most important question and ignored the other. "I watched a small group of news vans pulled up and now I am watching the many reporters that are now heading towards the door."

Daria nearly spit out her intermission sip, but figured it of more use choked down. She sat the coffee aside and grabbed the baseball bat always sitting in the hallway for such unwelcomed guests.

Opol zipped away from the window and headed off the potential P.R. nightmare. "Let me deal with them, please?"

Daria gave him a speculative squint. "Alright, I trust you and I can be kind of a bitch in the morning; thus the *rum*. Oh-but don't worry, my mother always used to say: As long as you don't go through more than one bottle a year you're in the clear. She always drank more than that though, but I don't. You should also know that I get a bit ramblingly too in the morning."

An insistent knock at the door turned them towards it.

Opol stoically said, "Trust me and I will not disappoint you."

Daria handed him the bat and sighed, "Fine. Go protect this family, Awesome Opol."

He simply smiled and nodded.

Daria headed off a sleepy-headed Windy slowly slumping through the living room.

After setting the bat down, Opol stepped towards the complexity of others as he'd long ago learned to do effectively; as though it were nothing but noise to be corrected. He swung the door open and the hallway filled with the chatter of people rabbling over one another with queries and questions. Awesome Opol was a wall unto the pushy mash of media.

Windy's eyes worrisomely creaked open. "What the crap is going on down there?!"

Daria gestured for her daughter to hold on one second and grabbed her invigorating morning beverage. After a thirst quenching '*ah*' she replied, "Buncha news Nazis."

Being in the cusp of waking up, Windella yawn-asked, "Like the ones with cameras and microphones?"

"*Ah*, yup."

"And Opol is talking to them?"

"*Ah*, yup."

Windy lifted her nose. "Why does that coffee smell like coconut?"

Before Daria could answer, Diana Folknor's furious voice cut across the house as clear as day. "Hey! It's me! Move or you're getting a knee ta the privates, baldy!"

The monk worried letting one of them in, even their loud-mouthed ally, would open a floodgate of them upon the family. Opol calmly replied, "I will not tolerate threats."

The predatorily effective reporter rashly did as she'd said, but her knee felt more like it'd struck a vice grip instead of

a satisfying sack.

Opol had clamped her knee between his yoga-strong thighs. With a quick spin, he turned the woman around and swat her on the butt like a bad child! "This is the last time I am saying it: This family has a cold and is taking the day off from everything, now leave or I will personally remove all of you."

Diana had her words caught in her throat as she rubbed her stinging bottom, camera man Izzy chuckling behind her.

Opol adamantly slammed the door and bolted every latch N' lock it had.

Windy, Daria, and now a barely awake and disheveled Dusky watched as the monk went around making sure every curtain was closed.

Dusky jabbered, "What's the-the, um, monk one doin?"

Daria happily explained, "He's protecting our family from the news Nazis."

Dusky tiredly perked up as one eye opened wider and not the other. "Is this a dream about Nazis again?"

Windy was the voice of reason on that one. "Not a dream doofus."

Dusky droned, "Oh yeah, how do I know that?"

Windy threw a pillow right into his unmoving face!

"That proves nothing," Dusky refuted.

Daria stuck her coffee in his hand and made him take a sip, promptly stealing it back.

Both of Dusky's eyes popped open. "Oh-damn, *Jesus woman*; not a dream, got it. So news people or something?"

Opol commandingly said, "I insist all

of you stay inside the entire day and allow me alone to deal with any visitors."

Daria and Windy gave one another a curious glance, Dusky trying but only looking hungover.

Goth Windy wound up the truth and sprung it free in a single sentence. "So is there a reason why you're acting like you know something we don't?"

Daria added, "And we can't act like hermits; Barter has school, that he's already late to, and there's like—other life-stuff that has to be done."

Dusky blinked a buncha times to shake off the weird dream-world thoughts still goofing about his mind.

Opol let the words come out of his open mouth once he realized theirs were done. "Yes, well, there is some truth to that indeed. I believe this unusual flood of media an attempt to slander your family, as some of the questions they barked at me were of the kind best left in the past."

Daria huffed, "Who cares. We can just laugh at their dumb lies."

Opol urgently explained, "These people do not use lies. They use past truths to make negatively skewed perceptions that can destroy someone's personal life."

Dusky shook his head. "Okay, I'm gonna need a lot more coffee before I can understand any of those big words."

Windy had to qualmed, "So you're a monk and you know all about news-Nazis and evil politicians; how?"

"I was born into a political family and was a politician for 4 years." Opol went with the cliff-noted explanation.

Daria dropped a dangerous mom-finger at

the monk. "There's more to that story that you better damn well tell us, but I guess that does all sound good and whatnot…*Ah*."

Opol lovingly projected to all of them, "Please, for me, take a lazy day to just be with one another. Allow the monsters that started that mess out there to stew in it without the one ingredient they want most of all; you."

Dusky gave an impressed huff. "The man knows his way around a speech."

A super buzzed Daria tossed her hands in the air and hollered, "Yay! Sick day coconut coffee for everyone!"

"Really?" Dusky eagerly perked up like a puppy waiting for a treat.

"*Ah*." Daria pointed him to the kitchen.

Windy sighed. "Well, guess I'm out-voted anyways. *So*…what's the *consensus* about underage drinking on sick-days?"

Daria said, "Same as international water laws."

Windy had no idea what that meant.

Opol helped her along. "It means there are no rules."

Goth Windy excitedly clapped as she ran into the kitchen to get some 'coffee' with Dusky.

Daria offered Opol her near-empty cup and he appreciatively took a sip as she said, "I had my first drink when I was 13."

"*Ah*," Opol sighed at the soothingly warming beverage. "Thank you, and I was 5 when I had my first drink of alcohol."

"You're welcome, and damn. That is very young to be drinking…if you don't mind me asking——"

"It was with my father. We drank cashew feni as we watched the fires of a nearby

riot."

Daria raised an eyebrow at the man. "You and I have very different lives my friend."

He grinned. "And for that difference I am truly thankful."

There was an oddly cautious knock at the door.

This time, Opol picked up the baseball bat on the way.

With her burgundy curls lowered towards the land, an apologetic Diana stood just outside; alone. "I'm very sorry for earlier, but it's important that I talk ta this family. I just wanna help em, cross my heart hon."

"Where is your camera man?"

"In the van around the block, waiting patiently."

Opol looked deep into her eyes and saw only worry. "Come, you have ten minutes."

"Thank you so much," Diana heaved in relief. "By the way, old man baldy, I like it rough so you'd better not keep smackin this booty unless you wanna start rockin it with yer monk-meat."

"That is a wildly inappropriate thing to say to another person." Opol was also not happy with the addition of 'old man' to the baldy.

"So is smacking them on the bum."

"Touché."

She teasingly swat him on the shoulder and said, "Now whose the one with a dirty mouth, ya old perv."

Opol felt incapable of dealing with this woman one on one; little did he know that he was but one of the many that could not.

Diana walked up to the two women, Dusky tending to the coffee collaborations, and handed them a pocket-beaten roll of papers.

"What's this?" Daria asked as she took it.

Diana gladly explained. "Just the list of nasty notes my boss gave me to verbally assault ya'll with; same as all them other vultures out there."

Like clockwork, there was another knock at the door; yet another brave reporter, but this one was without Ms. Folknor's honorable intentions.

"I will take care of that." Opol assured as he and the bat went to do exactly that.

Diana went on. "Listen, I don't know who ya'll pissed off, *but they are trying to destroy you*."

Windy casually replied, "We kinda saw it coming."

Dusky and Daria nodded in agreement.

"Oh…"

Opol slammed the door on someone's threatening background bickering as Dusky emerged from the kitchen with an extra cup in hand for their monk-bouncer.

Diana tossed her hands on her hips and shot a smirk at the two of them. "Ya'll are some clever folks. So what's the plan? I vote we get every rich dick in a hundred mile radius thrown in jail for thinking they can crap all over me—I mean you…" She cleared her throat.

Dusky handed Opol his coffee cup as he joined them. They all took a sip and '*ah*' as their bellies warmed.

Daria revealed their simple plan. "We're all just gonna hide inside all day."

Windy added a little definition. "Lazy sick-day style."

Shocked, Diana inhaled for a lengthy protest. "Every news station is trying to attack your personal characters' and you're pretending to be sick!? And why does it smell like coconuts in here?! Am I havin a stroke or somethin?! What is happening!?"

"Chill out." Windy held out the coffee to her.

"*Girl*-do I look like I need coffee?!"

Windy calmly retort, "Just shut up and take a sip; you'll feel better."

Diana took a sloppy sip and let her words roll on. "I don't think you understand-*ooh doggy*… That's some good coffee… May I?"

Windy gladly insisted she does.

She took another sip. "Yup." Diana nodded at the cup as she handed it back, pulling it in for another brief slurp before really handing it back. "Just like mom used to make." With a warmed belly, she took another look around at their smiling faces and sighed. "Gotta say, sittin round all day getting drunk—I mean, being *'sick'* aint soundin so bad…"

Daria knew the look on the woman's face from a mile away, because it was one she'd worn for years for the sake of a sad little patronizing paycheck. "You look tired hon, why not take a seat while Dusky makes you a coffee?"

"Sure," the tired reporter sighed. "Make it a double please?"

"Done." A buzzed Dusky drifted off to the kitchen again.

Opol went to deal with another knock.

Diana plopped her butt down on the

couch. "You folks are gonna be the death of me."

Windy hopped onto the couch as well, her alcohol-softened tongued holding nothing back. "You look like you need a serious life change, bags under your eyes and everything."

"Windella?!" Daria semi-disapprovingly chirped at her new daughter for the first time; it secretly felt good.

"What? The woman's lookin—not so good, like you used to from all the crappy job doing."

"Uh!" Daria squeaked, "You—witty little bitch. I am *so* damn proud of you." Her eyes welled-up a little behind her smile as she sat down with her daughter.

"*Mom*," Windy cooed at her for the first time in embarrassment; it felt wonderful, "Don't you dare start crying-because it'll make me do the same…"

Daria breathed and waved her hands about for a second. "Okay, I'm good."

Diana, being the ever-reporter she was, queried, "I was under the assumption your mother was someone else?"

Windy lifted her chin high and said, "Not anymore."

Daria proudly said, "Ooh-and I have paperwork to prove it… Actually, I'm a little lit and can't seem to remember where I put it…"

Windy sputtered into laughter along with her mother.

Dusky handed Diana the coffee and took a seat nearby.

The warm beverage was at the stressed reporter's lips near immediately. "*Whoo*-damn! I said a double not a triple."

Dusky's chuckling halted with a thought. "Hold on, is two twos considered a double or a triple? And what's a four called?"

Daria and Windy burst into laughter along with Dusky.

Diana couldn't help following suit with a few laughs of her own. She took another sip without thinking. "Oh-damn… Okay, so what you're all saying is…? I have no idea what any of you people are saying."

Half-behind a sip, Windy again said, "Life change."

Diana snort-scoffed. "*Please*, I'm a locally famous reporter and I"—her eyes widened with realization—"I hate my life…"

"Been there." Dusky toasted his cup.

Opol huffed into the living room. "The people living in this city sure use curse words with an impressive vigor. So, what did I miss?"

Daria briefly explained, "She hates her life."

Opol nodded. "Ah yes, the search for fulfillment is an arduous one."

Diana tiredly quacked, "What the Hell is he talkin bout?"

Dusky took that one with a pre-chortle. "Ya-know, sometimes I think I know and then someone explains it to me and then I know I didn't know at all."

The already exacerbated Diana looked to the last two people she could. "Please tell me one of you gals knows what either of these banana-headed buffoons are saying."

Daria chuckled, "Not usually."

"Okay," Windy said as she wiggled about their uneven couch, "This is kinda how it is. The bald one says *really* smart things,

but you need a dictionary to understand half of it. And the hairy one says *really* dumb things, but with an occasionally wise life-lesson."

Diana dropped an understanding finger-point. "Got it."

"*Hey*," Dusky griped.

Super Daria sang through the silly and sipping. "You know, having a friend in the media on our team *could* be a good thing for *everyone*…"

"Oh-no," Diana adamantly replied. "I can't take sides. It's like some ethics legal thing, maybe? I dunno. Either way, my entire *damn* life is built round workin for the same *damn* people that wanna flush ya like a deuce after cheese-grits. Heck, I've done come up with a good ten ways ta slander your family and make ya look worse since I've been sittin here. Trust me, I am not your ally."

Opol stoutly disagreed. "You are wrong. In the short time that I have known this family, they have convinced me of one thing for certain; and that is that they are allies to us all. Because those that simply and benevolently want better than what someone else has given are not enemies of anyone."

"Now that I understood." Diana cleared her throat. "Um…" The strong woman devoted to certainty could but say one thing. "I'm sorry, I can't give up my entire life for ya'lls sake."

Goth Windy spurt a sudden high-pitch 'HA'. "Sorry, it's just that, well, didn't you just admit you hate that life?"

"Crap on a cracker," Diana Folknor huffed like she meant it, "Yer right."

Dusky whispered to Windella, "Well said Windy," because even he would've been proud to have a daughter as mindful as Windella.

Diana loudly croaked, "Oh my crap-fuck-shit."

Daria rubbed the reporters back with one hand as she helped the coffee to her lips with the other. "Just take a sip and breathe before you decide to have a panic attack, okay?"

Diana nodded as she swallowed the boozy beverage, stiffly inhaling some organic air afterward. "Okay, I'm gonna need some more coffee in my coffee."

"Allow me," Dusky said as took the half empty cup away.

Like a popping brain-fart, Diana did a standing 360 of the room as though she'd lost her mind and started playing the Hokey Pokey. "Hold on one damn second, where's the freakin kid at?!"

Everyone experienced the same dumb feeling. However, like an exacerbating interlude, their question was answered and made worse by the slamming bathroom door in the back as well as the ill-timed cop-like thumping on the front door.

Daria and Opol simultaneously said, "I got it." They split off on their respective warpaths as the others' heads indecisively turned about.

Opol opened the door to the two very unhappy looking officers.

"Hello, we——"

"No," Opol said with conciseness.

The officer's nostrils unfavorably flared. "Excuse me?!"

Opol gladly excused him. "No to any and all actions you wish to occur from coming

here."

The officers both grew peeved brow-arches.

"Due to the contagious nature of this family's cold I deny all admittance for the safety of others." He assertively slammed the door.

The less vocal officer raised his fist to angrily wrap on the door again, but his pal grabbed his arm and hummed, "I don't know about you, but I'm clean out of sick-days…"

The other officer groaned, "Crap, yeah, me too… Didn't you say this was one of those 'waste of time wellness-checks'?"

"Sure did," he chipperly chirped as they turned around and headed back to their car.

Jeff watched the police leave without a scene like the rest of them. He groaned to his fellow reporter, "I'm not sure waiting around here is doing us any good. These people are hunkered down with baldy and that red-headed ball-buster already inside; and you know she isn't coming off of a damn quip when she does come outta there."

"Well I'll tell you what Jeff, he's not the only one wanting to give her a good smack on the bottom."

"…What?"



Daria tapped on the bathroom door. "You in there sweetie?"

Barter answered with an unintentional, "It's too blue."

"What's blue?!" Her question was

somewhat answered by the sound of the boy barfing in the toilet. Daria's motherly instincts overrode the rest of her head as she twisted the handle and plopped her face against the locked door. "What the?! Open this door young man!"

"No! Uck, Barter doesn't need help barfing."

Diana popped up out of nowhere. "Everything okay?"

Daria shot her a stern glance before going back to angry jiggling the door handle. "Don't you go reportering on me. Just go back to the living room-Barter I'm gonna spank your butt."

"Actually, I wanna help ya'll."

"That's nice, goodbye." She gave the door a jerk or two.

Diana took a big uncharacteristic breath and calmly replied, "Seriously hon, I've made my decision. I'm gonna help ya make a difference in this world."

"Grrr!" Daria was definitely listening, but she was also trying to rip a door open with her bare hands. "That sounds great and all, honestly," she sincerely huffed, "But would you mind helping me get this door open before we tackle the world?"

Diana removed a bobby pin from her uneffected mop with a smirk. She hunched in front of the old, unused keyhole.

"You can't be serious?"

The quirky reporter jabbed the pin into the door handle and opened it with a single twist.

"You're serious."

Diana proudly held up the bobby pin. "They used to call me Devious D, on account I was always stickin my nose where it didn't

belong and kinda slutty."

"Of course," was all Daria could muster in reply; she too was on that list of people who couldn't handle Ms. Folknor without backup. Her head speculatively tilt as she entered and saw no barfing Barter at all. Daria's expression soured and her face greened as she checked the toilet. "Oh god that's gross. Eck!"

Diana couldn't help peeking herself. "O~h!" She covered her mouth and swooped over to the sink with Daria. "Why is it so many colors?!"

"Erck! Ugh, stop talking about it and flush it already."

"You flush it."

"Barter thinks the colors are because of the gummy bears he snuck into his room last night…"

Both the gals looked to the closed shower curtain and bathtub that Barter's voice had come from. However, as they took a step closer they caught sight of the kaleidoscopic upchuck and both gagged back to the sink.

Daria groaned, "Just close your eyes and flush it already."

Diana harped, "Dude! Your nasty kid, your nasty problem."

Daria grimaced in agony, because she knew those were the damn rules. "*Fine*." Daria covered her eyes and scooted closer to the toilet.

Diana croaked, "*Eww*-I can smell it."

"Eck! Damnit Diana! Stop talking about it!"

Dusky popped his head in. "Everything okay in here?"

Daria had never been happier to see a

half-drunk hippie. "Dusky, yes, flush the toilet for us right now-please."

"*Um*"—Dusky shrugged—"Okay." He walked right over and flushed the toilet with ease.

Both the ladies gasped in relief, as though the air had been cleansed.

Dusky chuckled. "What was that? Looked like gummy worms."

Barter replied, "Nope, it was bears…"

All three of them walked over to the bathtub and slid open the curtain.

Barter lay there on the bottom of the dry bathtub, curled up with his hands under his cheek.

Dusky asked it before either of them could. "What're you doing in the bathtub?"

Barter sickly sighed. "The cold bathtub makes the blue's after-green go away; and welcome to the team, Dutiful Diana."

"Dutiful Diana?!" She honked in repeat.

"Barter heard you talking to mom, and he can tell when people really mean the words they say."

Windy slovenly squeaked, "What's the everyone doing in the poopin room?"

Daria answered, "Barter's sick, I think. Are you sick?"

"*No*," Barter refuted. "I told you, it's just the blue and green."

"Yeah-well," Daria rolled with it, "None of us know what that means, and you threw up, so I'm going with sick."

Barter shrugged as much as one could huddled in a bathtub. "Barter's okay with that," he sighed into the old enamel covered cast iron.

"Ugh-erk!" Windy suddenly blurted as she plugged her nose. "What's that stinky rainbow stuff in the toilet?"

Windy bravely jabbed at the flush handle as she strode away from it, doing her best to ignore what she'd seen and smelt. "Stop being weird and get out of the bath tub already kid. Ooh, we should play that game with the sexy people and all the guns and blood."

Daria grumbled at her, "No more coffee for you."

Barter sat up a little at the thought of rekindling his gaming addiction. "That does sound fun, but—why is everyone holding coffee cups?"

Goth Windy gladly explained that one for them all. "That's cause it's stay inside *all* day with coffee-sexy video games-and whatever else—*uh*, we want day."

"Barter likes coffee too." He sat up all the way and leaned against the front of the bathtub.

Dusky gently ruffled his hair. "Feelin a little better?"

Barter shrug-nodded.

Daria felt his head for a fever. "Nope, no fever. Maybe you just ate too much candy before bed? Or got a belly bug?"

Before Diana's mildly inebriated brain could make the connection to her hand, Barter had taken the coffee cup from it.

Everyone watched in horror as the kid took a big gulp. Then everyone wait as his face fervently pursed for a shocked moment.

Barter gave the cup a very confused glare as he handed it back. "Barter thinks that coffee sucks."

Daria mushed his face and cooed, "That's because you're a good boy."

Barter lazily pushed her away. "*Stop*, no more baby talk ever again ever. Barter's

gonna be a politic-pola—political candidate; he has to be all serious and stuff."

"Don't ya worry cutie," Daring Diana assured. "Most 'serious' politicians are basically diaper-wearing man-babies. So-you'll do fine."

Barter beamed at her. "Thank you." Apparently he was not upon the inability to deal with Diana Folknor list. He blinked a bunch of times as he straightened his back out. "Huh?"

His mother pined over him; to the boy's annoyance of course. "What is it butter-bum?"

"Mom!?" Barter flailed at her gentle touch. "Seriously, *stop*. Barter's just feeling better. Gross coffee helped him, but he really doesn't want more."

"Good boy." Daria pat his head. "Don't worry, mommy will go make you some warm chamomile tea with a dash of raw honey."

Windy calmly stated, "At least now we can blackmail Diana if she tries to pull a reporter on us."

"Windella!?" Daria harped at her daughter. "You're a mean little drunk."

Diana laughed and nodded in respect of the young woman's bold move. "I'd of done the same."

Daria lightly tossed her hands in the air. "Whatever, I'm gonna go make tea, and maybe some more coffee…"

Dusky waited until Daria was out of the room to chuckle at her. "She gets so ultra-mom when she drinks."

Windy did a little dance as she sang, "*I think it's sexy gun-game time*."

Barter stood up with a wobble and sat down on the edge of the tub. "Barter thinks

Goth Windy is right, but he also thinks he needs a piggyback ride."

Daring Dusky handed his coffee cup to Windy and raised a strong chin. "Consider it done, Oh fearless leader."

Barter happily hollered, "Yay," as he flopped down upon his kneeling father's back. "Video games for everyone!"

"Um," Diana raised a speculative finger, "Honestly, I aint never played no video game in my entire life…"



"Eek! What is that thing!?" Diana screamed as she held the control as far left as she could, despite it having no effect on her character's direction.

Dusky was laughing so hard that he had to put his controller down, because Diana's bikini-clad character with a massive rifle getting smacked around by white zombie worms. "That's just so wrong," he wheezed behind his uncontrollable laughter.

Diana quacked, "Well-maybe if my stupid guy's boobs weren't so big she could hit stuff. Ah! Why is everything and me on fire now?!"

Windy chortled. "That was me. …Hey! What the?! Did you just disintegrate me Barter?"

Barter's shit-eating smirk said it all.

"Dude, we're supposed to be on the same team."

Barter's smirk fell away as he hummed, "*Oh yeah*…"

They shared a laugh. "Ooh-I'm alive again."

Daria and Opol just watched all four of

them superficially slaughtering one another in a collaborative crap-shoot; the entire point of the game moot before its own insisted idiotic fun.

Opol felt the need to speculate, "Such exposure to artificial gratification in the form of violence can't be good for a child."

Daria let her first thought slip on that one, "The only thing not good for a child in reference to stupid video games is too much of them and a parent who doesn't stress the fact that they will turn you into a fat basement-goblin that never leaves home."

Opol burst into laughter for a good few seconds that he reveled in a few more after. "That is a very good point."

Daria smiled as she handed him the extra cup she was making. "I thought you'd like some tea too."

"Thank you. Wait, is this—"

"It's just tea and honey."

Opol smiled and sipped. "That is quite good. Thank you."

Daria cheered her coffee to that as she brought her son his tea. "Here, drink this sweetie."

"Barter-can't-mom, Windy's throwing bee bombs at him."

Diana suddenly shouted, "Ooh-I shot a laser thing! How did I do that?!"

Daria took the controller from her son and stuck the hefty cup of tea in those hands instead. "Drink that right now young man."

Barter grumbled and groaned as he sipped away.

Windy whined, "*What?!* Why is my sexy man exploded now?"

Daria replied, "Invisible death-mine trap; I'm also about to—and now Dusky is being killed by a black hole."

They all turned away from the TV and looked right at her.

"What? I'm a single mother with too much free time and a need to kill something."

Everyone knew that was not the kinda logic anyone argued with.

Barter suddenly sat up straight and choked on a little tea as it struck him like a ton of bricks.

Diana gave the boy a light pat on the back as she asked, "Are you okay?"

Daria reprimand, "Don't drink so fast."

Barter adamantly shook his head at all of them. "No-no, Barter figured it out."

Windy chipperly asked, "Figured what out? How I'm stabbing you with a knife right now?"

"No-no-no," Barter fervently refuted. "Barter needs to give people who we are."

Everyone glanced at one another in confusion.

Sitting in a nearby recliner, Opol hummed, "This tea is quite good, to me that is. However, this tea may be disgusting to someone else. Even if that person needed to drink this tea, I could never make them like the taste of the tea."

There was yet another knock at the door in the seemingly endless string of uninvited visitors.

"Excuse me." Opol sat his tea down and went to deal with the next loud-mouthed moron who hadn't gotten the hint.

Daring Dusky sighed. "Well, I think what he's saying is that even if people know

who we are it won't make them like us."

Windy had to ask Daria, "Is it weird when he knows stuff or is it just me?"

"No-it's weird."

Dusky just grunted to himself.

"Opol's wrong," Barter said without a hint of uncertainty.

Diana giggled to herself, "I'm totally gonna bazooka Windy's face," half-listening and half-gaming.

Daria qualmed, "Since when is that monk ever wrong?"

Barter answered with unusual ease. "Because he was only thinking about himself. Barter and his family doesn't have to tell people who they are, because we have a Daring Diana to do it for us…"

Ms. Folknor spouted, "HA-HA! You blew up like a tomato wit a firecracker in it! …Why's everyone staring at me?" Her half-listening had dipped the other way a minute ago.

"Barter needs you to reporter his family."

Diana replied with a firm, "Pass," as she went back to her artificial slaughter fest.

Barter attempted to change her mind with a simple, "We're running for mayor."

Diana sat down the controller and sighed. "Okay," she asked of everyone, "What does he mean *'we're'* running for mayor?"

They all smirked at her as Opol sat back down and inquired, "Why is everyone smirking?"

Daria explained, "Diana's trying to wrap her head around all of us running for mayor as a family."

Opol nodded in understanding as he

resumed enjoying his tea.

Diana's face made a series of exacerbated expressions. "Okay, so, yeah, ya'll can't do that; one position, one person, that there's the rule."

Daria said, "Not if the people vote for different." Her eyes widened in shock that those words had come out of her mouth.

Diana Folknor flashed her infamous pessimism at all of them, locking eyes for uncomfortable moments. She only saw their confident, and a little lit, faces. "Ya'll people are out of your damn minds." She picked up the controller, made her character pull a grenade pin, and sat it down. "I'll need my camera man if ya'll are serious, but I aint gonna lie for ya."

The bikini character went boom.

Opol chuckled at Diana. "These are not the kind of people that need lies to live their lives."

Diana snipped at the monk, "Oh-shut-up-and-drink-your-tea." She felt the need to say, "Seriously, fighting politicians doesn't historically end well for folks… Ya'll *folks* buyin what I'm sellin?"

Brave Barter let the words fall from his heart like he'd been trying to do the whole time. "Barter doesn't wanna be afraid of being free anymore."

Everyone sat in silent awe of such words for a moment, and how much those words felt like ones they should've said.

With a light catch in her throat, Diana replied, "Y-Yeah, okay-sure. *Um*, I'll um, I'll do—I'll do everything I can to help that happen."

A quite intoxicated Windella lifted her coffee cup and announced to Ms. Folknor,

"Welcome ta the family, Dutiful Diana."

DAY 14
Greater Good Vs Good

The Colonel enjoyed the monochromatic hallways of the upper city condo; it reminded him of the many military prisons he'd visited in his youth. He abruptly turned to the black door with little silver numbers and letters right above its tiny glass peep-hole as though performing a simple bootcamp drill. His knuckles wrapped on the doors solidness.

It wasn't long before someone inside darkened the peep-hole.

A series of 'clinks' and 'clunks' cluttered the door before it opened to Anderson's bespectacled smiling face. He tossed a friendly salute up to his brown, well-groomed hairline. "Sir."

The Colonel gave a lax salute in return. "At ease Major."

Anderson chuckled as he lowered his hand. "Nothing major about me anymore sir; retired and tolerating it."

"Sounds just like an outside contractor to me," he cleverly retort, knowing full well a man of Anderson's skills was never retired from aiding those in power when asked.

Anderson nodded. "Yes I have had a contract or two to keep me busy. But where are my manners; please, come in and have a seat. Is there a beverage of choice you care for sir?"

"Scotch, neat please."

"Yes sir."

The Colonel almost couldn't believe how clean and kempt the large condo was, everything from furniture to the décor was as airbrushed as a Better Homes cover. He was no stranger to the fastidiousness of this man, but often he forgot how far it teetered towards disorder.

"Here we are sir. Please, have a seat." Anderson sat the two glasses and one bottle of scotch down at the sleek metal table with only two chairs. "Tell me, is it business or leisure today sir?" He poured them each a half glass.

"Both," the Colonel replied as he and Anderson toast their glasses with an affirming crystal 'clink'. "*Ah*. Leisurely, I found myself in need of your scotch."

Anderson conservatively chuckled. "Good scotch *is* hard to come by. Though I do suppose it is the business that brings you more than the scotch, sir?"

The Colonel took another sip and disappointedly sighed. "Unfortunately, yes. As you know, men of our means rarely find ourselves without business to be taken care of."

Anderson gave a similar sigh as he toasted to that.

"I need you to ruin the functionality of a local website."

"Ah, I see. Some sort of P2P piracy site or something."

"No nothing like that. Just a small revolutionist sight that a few acquaintances of mine need to have gone before it becomes a bigger problem."

Anderson gave the Colonel and himself a freshening dash in their glasses. "Something like that is easily taken care of with a few

easily placed Trojans and Worms. What's the name of the site?"

"Bartering For Bravery dot com, all one word."

Scotch nearly slipped through Anderson's sinuses as those words struck him mid-sip. He painfully swallowed, then studiously cleaned any and all dribbles, drops, and spillage with a nearby napkin.

"Are you alight?" The Colonel curiously inquired, already reading the man's every reaction as though the little two person table were a battlefield.

"Fine," he replied with a throat declutter, folding the barely dirty napkin into a tiny square and sitting it at the corner edge of the table.

Colonel or not, he gave the man the benefit of the doubt. "Are you familiar with this site?"

Anderson's hand nervously shook as he took a necessary sip. "I am…"

"What do you know of it and those that constructed it?"

Anderson anxiously cleaned the non-existent mess upon the table and did the same thing with that napkin. "Forgive me, as you know I do not do well with stress…"

"I do recall, yes. But why are you stressed?" Out of respect, he gently pulled the truth out of him.

Anderson took another shaky sip and an alcohol-hued deep breath afterwards. "Well sir, I—am the person that constructed that site."

"I see, and how is it that an autistic 8 year old was able to *procure* your elite expertise?"

Anderson couldn't help cracking a grin

as he answered that one. "With an illegally purchased pre-paid credit card."

"I'm afraid I am going to need a lot more details than that."

Anderson's butt clenched like back in bootcamp behest the Colonel's exacting expression and uncompromising words. "Yes sir. Well, I volunteered some maintenance and software improvement to a local public school."

"Volunteer? You have never seemed the type to waste time with futile charities."

"I guess I—changed my mind… Suffice to say, I encountered the same boy that had led me to this volunteering and agreed to aid him in the building of his site for a substantial fee."

The Colonel sat down his abruptly empty glass with an air of unease. "I see. You share an affinity with this boy due to his mental state."

"I sympathize with his condition, yes. Allow me." Anderson refilled the Colonel's glass and topped off his own.

He watched the amber liquid slide around inside the glass as he warbled it about. "Sympathy seems a foolish thing to follow for the sake of an impudent child."

Such words of judgement would've made Anderson begin a series of stutters or trembles in anxiety; however, this time he let a subtle laugh slip before he said, "I guess I just wanted to do something different."

The Colonel's entirety quietly recourse in confusion. "I don't understand. Are you saying this is your new hobby?"

Anderson's brow tensed with uncertainty, because explaining a newly

acquired frame of mind was like explaining why you love the color blue. "No sir, not exactly. How do I explain this… I want to do something that helps people, instead of the usual things that hurt them."

He understood that loud and clear. "That's good." The Colonel finished his glass in one gulp and firmly sat it down. "Because what I need you to do is going to help a lot of important people, including me and even *Annabelle*…"

"A-A-Annabelle is uh, she uh, how is she?"

The Colonel went for his emotional vulnerability like a wolf for a throat. "Good, but she needs your help just like I do."

Anderson curiously queried, "Why?"

He smirked. "Let's just say we're in the same club being hurt by this site."

Anderson felt a flurry of confliction clamor his head. He took a quick sip that he almost choked on to try and ease his nerves. "Sir—Sir I'm sorry, but I don't understand how a child and a website could ever hurt you or anyone you may ally with. Men such as you govern with actions above the laws that control the commoners of our country."

"That may be true, but they're the kind of problem that needs to be taken care of long before it can become a problem."

Anderson shook his head. "This doesn't feel right…"

The Colonel nodded in agreement. "The brave actions that maintain the sanctity of this country rarely come without that feeling."

Anderson felt the word 'sanctity' bounce around his head. "But sir? This boy

is just trying to get people to help each other. How is he a danger?"

The Colonel gladly answered that with the answer he'd arrived with. "The boy's family is using him to aid their political stance against the same forms of hierarchy that maintain the very order of our cities and states."

Anderson refilled both their glasses, a little fuller this time, as he did his best to mull that long-winded mess over. The best he could think to ask was, "So what is their political stance?"

"The undermining of economy maintaining fiscal entities that—"

"I'm sorry sir," Anderson uncharacteristically interrupted, "But I have to stop you. I am a very smart man, but everything you are saying is—well, politically-avoidant in nature. Again I ask, why would such powerful people worry about a child and his recklessly supportive family?"

The Colonel felt as if he were talking to a different man for a moment, then he saw the trembling liquid in Anderson's glass as he held it. "It doesn't matter why," he coldly proclaimed. "All that matters is that we do what must be done."

Anderson could hear it in the Colonel's tone… "I see, I am as ever a soldier as always sir. But do you truly think of me as no more than a tool to be used for the greater good?"

"No, I think of you as a one-of-a-kind tool; one to be treasured and well-utilized."

Nostalgia somehow nudged its way past the awful feeling in his gut. "Do you recall what you said to me the first time we met?"

The Colonel chuckled at such an odd thought. "You were huddled in that corner of the barracks with a bayonet, ready to stab anyone that crossed your path. I said: Are you daft boy? And you simply said: No sir. The calm in your tone and preparedness in your eyes told me that you had an untapped mind."

Anderson explained himself as he never had. "I would've killed myself if not for your direction, because I felt trapped and alone. There was no family that cared of my well-being and that bootcamp had transfer papers to the psychiatric ward already filled out. Above all people in this world, I respect and admire you most of all, sir."

The Colonel took a couple stiff sips in lieu of those unexpected words. He cleared his throat, unaware if it was the scotch creating the warm feelings in his chest or Anderson's openness. "Well, I must say, that is—I am honored to be of such importance to you." He lifted his glass to him with as much of a smile as could be viewed upon his stern visage. "To the bridges we burn."

"And the better ones we build in their place." Anderson finished their familiar toast as he shared the Colonel's smile.

"I knew I came to the right place."

Anderson's smile fell away fast. "Actually sir, I um… Well, I can't do as you need done…"

The Colonel looked bewildered for a second before he started laughing. "Good one Anderson."

"No, sir, I'm serious. I can't shut down the site for you."

The near-empty glass made an ominous sound beneath his clenching fist. He calmly

sat down his drink. "For the sake of reminiscing, I have to ask: Are you daft?"

Anderson raised his chin high. "No sir. I just think that a child looking for a better world with his family are not the kind of people I want to hurt, socialist political agenda or not." He jumped as the Colonel's fist dropped to the table like a mallet!

"Dammit boy. You know the side you stand beside soldier. People like them cause more bad than good."

Anderson slammed back his drink, cringed and squinted for a moment, then slammed the glass down. "Reusing an inadequate operating system isn't as good as trying something different…you know, but with people and politics."

The Colonel didn't feel like he was talking to the same Anderson at all. With the static inhibition of alcohol, he angrily shouted, "Different is the same thing that causes riots!"

Altruism and Anderson became acquainted for the first time as a wave of revelation tingled to his fingertips and toes. "It's also the same thing that founded this country, and lead an old general to throw a troubled boy a bone…"

The Colonel stood from his chair and headed towards the door without a word.

Anderson promptly followed, actually ignoring his want to wipe down the table first. "Sir, I—"

"Save it Anderson. You already know the rules of the battlefield."

"This isn't a battlefield sir."

The Colonel cracked the door and turned to his ally on hiatus. "It's always a

battlefield boy, some just lack the guns." He then made a common, and often followed through move of his; the threat. "I'll give you 24 hours to change your mind and shut down the site, pro-bono of course, or I'll have you charged with every crime looming around this place and then some."

Anderson grabbed his mouth a little too late as a laugh lunged out.

"Did you just laugh at me boy?!"

Anderson decided to own his action, knowing the option of not going down the rabbit hole was long over. "Yes I did sir, because I am OCD and electronically monitor every facet of my own life. So much so that any false charges simply wouldn't stick and the only crime currently occurring in my home is the illegally imported scotch that *you've* been recorded drinking with me."

The Colonel predatorily growled, "You need to stop this stupidity now, Anderson Atwal. It would not be hard to have this entire building's electronics struck by an unfortunate EMP event…"

Anderson suddenly saw the man as he'd never seen him before; petty and desperate. So he said what he never thought he'd be able to say to anyone. "I love you sir, my electronics are thoroughly protected from EMP, and you're so wrong you need more difference in your life than any of us. Now please get out of my home."

The Colonel coldly replied, "Thank you for the scotch," and left without another word.

Anderson closed the door and latched every latch, lock, and chain he'd rigged to it. "Wow," he huffed in disbelief. "I can't believe I said all that… I have to clean my

table and the kitchen floor." About half way to the table, Anderson skid to a stop and furiously shook his head. "No! No! I need—I *need* to find Barter and his family…" His demeanor relaxed as he lifted a gasp to the air. "Oh crap, I have to find Barter and his family because they're in danger…"

DAY 14
The other Shoe

"WELL I TOOK A WALK AROUND THE WORLD TO EASE MY TROUBLED MIND!"

"Son of a bitch!" Daria hollered as she leapt out of bed. It took her a second to wobble awake, hangover-fuzz muddling her mind. "Is that—Kryptonite?" She clomped out into the hallway, looming towards the living room and the very loud 3 Doors Down song. Not to her surprise, she found Barter at the heart of the noise.

"MOM!" Barter beamed as he jived around to the tunes. "We're making political campaign waffles!"

Windy confirmed said waffles with stuffed, syrupy cheeks and a happy wave.

Daria stormed over, yanked the remote out of Barter's hands, and drastically reduced the volume of their discount-aisle entertainment center. Head throbbing and her mouth dry, she could but ask in exacerbation, "Why?!"

Barter gave her a blank, mouth-agape stare for a second. "Whoops, sorry mom. Barter thinks he got a little over—what's the word…vealos-no, zealous."

Daria felt some of that hangover hubbub away behind her grin and the warm feeling she got inside her heart from her son simply caring about her. "That's okay, wait, did you say waffles?"

He excitedly nodded.

"We broke the waffle iron a long time ago, how're you—" She tried to ask as she

turned to the kitchen and had it half-answered before she could finish asking.

Opol waved from the stove as sous chef Dusky buttered the plates already full of too many waffles.

Dusky kindly inquired, "Could you turn the music up again, please."

"Uh, *sure*," Daria droned in an uncertain daze. Upon turning the music back up a little, she immediately turned it back down. "No-wait a damn minute! Why is everyone so damn chipper this morning-and how the heck are you making waffles in there right now?!"

Dusky stepped aside and pointed at Opol, proverbially passing the buck.

Opol flipped off the stove and plucked out the ringed aluminum waffle mold with an oven mitt, setting it aside. He then flipped the last pan-sized waffle from the cast iron onto an empty plate. Opol again lifted the lightweight mold and showed it to her. "It is an aluminum mold I casted in your backyard with a metal pot and a jet-oven, using your old waffle iron and a big roll of aluminum foil that was in your cupboard. Also, I found the ring for it in a drawer of what appeared to be miscellaneous nonsense."

Daria's dropped jaw said it all, but she'd more to say. "I am very hungover and have no idea what the heck of any of whatever is happening right now. So would someone please get me a plain waffle smothered in butter before I dry-heave on my son?"

Opol and Dusky fumbled about for a second before Opol relay the last waffle and an opened stick of salted sweet-cream butter to Dusky.

Dusky promptly mushed off half the stick atop the big waffle and chauffeur the food to her.

Daria rubbed her forehead as she grumbled, "Thank you," and plopped down on the couch.

"Oh," Dusky said, "I forgot to get you a fork."

Daria nodded and taco the buttery waffle, chomping into it; she was not concerned with said fork. Her eyes squint a little and her nose lifted to the warm cup of homemade herbal tea slid in front of her by Opol. Daria did not execute any decorum with her manly consuming of everything. She gave but a, "Itsh soopor goo," between chewing.

Barter loudly laughed. "Mom gets mad at Barter for eating like that."

The others shared his amusement, while Daria destroyed the needed carbs and fats. She halted her chewing and curiously pointed to the dining table they never use; oddly organized assortment of crayon covered lined paper covering its top.

"That's Barter's constitutionals!"

Thankfully Windy was between bites. "Diana set that up for us this morning before she left, we just wrote all over them with crayon and stuff. It's supposed to be like a political plan thing or some crap? I dunno, Diana told us to fill in all the blanks and follow it step by step."

Daria resisted her remaining fistful of waffle for a moment. "Hold on, where the heck did she go? Did she take our interview with her?"

Windy nodded, because that was all she could do with waffle stuffed in her face.

"Do not worry," Opol assured. "We can trust her. I believe she said she was going to make multiple copies of that interview and then commit career suicide by hand-delivering them to every news station in Coriander and the state."

Dusky added, "Yeah-she did say she might just keep driving after that, somethin about becoming a new woman and buying boots or something."

Everyone nodded in confirmation.

Daria took a deep breath. "Oh, cool." She drifted over to the table with a trap full of waffle. Daria circled the papers for a minute, smiling at some and squinting at the rest of it.

"*Ah!*" Windy loudly announced her waffle-induced satiation. "Pretty neat huh. It's like—a map on how-ta be a leader."

"*Yeah*," Daria droned as she continued reading, "It's more than that… Hey Windy?"

"Yeah mom?"

Daria couldn't help blushing at that still. "Would you mind getting pictures of all this for me?"

"No prob, but why?"

Daria smiled and sighed. "Because this is something—real, that my family made with the help of a good friend."

Opol had to say, "I have never heard a better reason for anything."

Goth Windy gave her syrupy plate a swift tongue attack, before whipping out her phone and photographic-self.

Daring Dusky was the first to point out the obvious, perusing the table as well. "This looks like the kinda thing that'll get us all in *a lot* of trouble."

"I agree," Daria said as she took a

seat, "But—yeah-I agree…"

A bellyful Brave Barter lifted his leg high as he walked up the chair seat onto the table like stairs. Chin up, his family's ajar jaws accompanied, he brazenly proclaimed with the wholehearted tone of a kind titan, "There is no trouble stronger than our together. Barter's family is the most amazing family in Coriander, they just have to believe him for it to be true."

A humbling hush befell the room.

Opol stepped to the table and spoke as strongly as his young ally in existence. "I have believed nothing less about this family since meeting all of you."

Daria smiled and stood too. "You're a part of this family too, Opol. And I believe you Barter."

Dusky stepped up and said, "I've always believed in you boy, that's why I put up with yer moms crap." He chuckled as Daria gave him a friendly shoulder-punch.

Windy giddily clapped as she raised a fist high. "I believe in all of you weirdos *so* much!"

Super Daria beamed at each one of them with the secret technique of confidence-creating kindness that only mother's and womankind were privy to.

Opol cleared his throat. "Well, it looks as if Barter's right foot is right where we need to start this adventure today…"

Barter looked own, awkwardly tilted his head, and smirked. "Barter loves step 1…"

Windy felt the unavoidable urge to loudly squeak, "All we need are costumes and a super villains to become the freakin—whatever-sounds-awesome-and-isn't-copyright-

infringing League!"

Dusky nodded. "I could get behind some costumes, my hippy looks getting kinda old…"

Daria dropped her two cents. "I always thought you looked more like a filthy hobo."

"Hey…"

Windy added her cents as well. "I always thought he looked more like a crackhead bum."

"Dude?!"

Barter lifted the crayon-colorful paper to his family. "Barter should tell you all that costumes are actually-kinda part of step 1…"

Everyone squinted at the bottom of the paper, grins growing across their faces.

"It does say that!" Opol abruptly sang as he burst into laughter. "I have not changed my style of dress in 57 years."

"Barter also does not like the idea of having a super villain and did not write it down on any of these."

Windy snort-chuckled. "Oh please, like there'd ever really be some big monster or raving wacko trying to destroy us."



"I'LL DESTROY THEM ALL!" The maniacal Mayor Michaelson roared in his empty office, laptop screen ominously crackling beneath his furiously gripped hands upon its sides. All he could do was continue to seethe as he watched on.

Cuddled up on the couch with Barter and Windy, the pre-recorded Daria went on with the rest of her family behind her. "So that's how it is. We're not the evil degenerates the media makes us out to be.

We're just a family that picked a fight with the wrong politician, but we're also the family that refuses to be another victim of bought and paid media."

"So please," Windy added, "Don't listen to the terrible things everyone's saying about us; listen to the good things we're telling you right now."

"Barter and his family want a better home for everyone." Barter dropped a strong thumb to his chest. "So if you want a better city like him than please help us."

Dusky said, "Because we may not know you yet—"

"But we are your family too," Opol finished with Dusky's approving shoulder pat, letting the words simply slip in honesty.

Diana spun around and took the spotlight in front of the camera. "There it is folks. A story of good people being attacked by self-interested millionaires capable of manipulating the very legal system sat in place to protect us, millionaires including the very people that employ me. That's why this is my last interview, and I'm choosing to do it for the right reason; I suggest you do the same, people of Coriander. This is Diana Folknor saying: Thanks fer everything, goodbye, and good luck."

"RHAAAH!" Glass popped and cracked, spitting at Mark's beet-red face as he horizontally folded it in rage! He calmly let go of the broken computer and took a deep breath. His enraged eyes shot to the knock at the door. Mark calmly lifted the garbage bin beside his desk and swiped the laptop off the edge into it. "*Come in*,"

Mayor Mark chipperly projected.

Annabelle floated in and took a seat as she opened her binder and perused the data. "So, it appears we're not getting the feedback we'd expected—"

"Is that so," Mark heaved in interruption before flipping to baby-gibber insulting, "Not getting feedback huh?"

Anabelle's nostrils flared with fury. "And just what is your damn problem?"

Mayor Mark used his veteran skills of condescension. "I take it you haven't seen the morning news…well, and here I thought you'd said you were good at your job. My mistake…"

Anabelle the Advisor flung out her phone, flicking and tapping away. She scanned over the necessary media outlets to get the abridged version of what was happening. Annabelle sadly clicked the power button upon her phone's side. "I must say, I did not see that coming. Have you informed the Colonel and that pug-faced lawyer of yours?"

Mark scoffed. "No, I just watched it a minute ago."

"So," Annabelle harped loud and clear, "You thought the best way to waste precious time was being a condescending asshole rather than working on a counter-plan to the media shit-parade coming our way?!"

"Um—"

"Is that your final answer?"

Mark dawned an insidious smirk. "Damn you're hot when you're ripping me a new one."

Annabelle stabbed an advising finger at him. "I know I'm hot-now stop screwing around and call Leland already. I'll call my

uncle. I'm not exactly sure how this Barter and his family managed to pull this off, but it's gonna take some serious twisting to undo it."

Mark's hopes suddenly sank as he felt the weight of what was happening heaping over the back of his neck. "I can't believe some low-town trailer-trash family is going to be my undoing…"

"Your undoing? Oh please, it's not like they're going to come and bring you to justice dawning capes or something."



"Barter likes the cape."

Windy adamantly shook her head in disagreement. "Will someone please tell the kid that a cape is always a bad fashion choice in any situation?"

Daria unhelpfully said, "I think it's *cute*, and that white cape gives me a great idea."

"That is not helpful, *mom.*" Windy protested a little too late, Daria already heading for her room. She looked down and sighed at her little brother, smiling along with him as well. "Seriously, nothing I can do to stop this whole cape thing from happening?"

Barter shook his head.

"Yeah-that's what I thought… Wait, what're you doing to it now?"

"Barter's gonna write inspert-inst-*inspirational* words on the cape too."

Windy dawned a speculative brow-bunch. "What words?"

Barter shrugged as he collected the scattered markers around his room.

Being the helpful sister she was, Windy suggested, "You might wanna use paint. Markers will just wash off and tie-dye everything."

Barter dropped the pile of markers in his hands, but not because of Windy's wonderful idea.

Daring Dusky gently cleared his throat, feeling like a little kid again as he stood strong before the looming fear of criticism. "Well, what do you think?"

Barter and Windy's heads simultaneously tilt and teetered, the both of them giving an approving nod in the end.

Though Dusky's outfit was a simple, well-worn gray suit with his hair actually combed, the different colored bandannas of past causes tied around his left forearm and the numerous patches of protest sewn across it said that the outfit was no bargain-bin buy. "Why aren't you saying anything? I knew it. I still look like a hippy, don't I?"

Windy's smile widened as she said, "Well yeah, but in a good way."

"Really?"

Barter confirmed that with a similar smile and an eager, "Barter thinks *definitely* in a good way; whatever a hippy is."

"Cool." Dusky smiled as he gave his collar an adjusting tug. "Is that a cape?"

Windy drummed, "*Yes*…"

"Barter has to write something cool on it now, but with paint."

Dusky rubbed his chin at the thought. "Yup, a cape with some anti-government slogan would be pretty awesome."

Windy's griping didn't end. "Not you too? Ugh, what is wrong with guys? You do

realize that a cape is just 1 fifth of a dress?"

They didn't realize that, but they also didn't care.

"How about," Dusky preemptively suggested, "Something like 'Freedom Forever, Burn Democracy' and then a buncha excitement marks?"

Barter began to think it over.

Thankfully, Windy was wise enough to squawk, "No! What is wrong with you da—um, I mean Dusky…"

"Whoa," was the 1st thing Dusky could think to say; the 2nd was better. "You're right, that might be a little too radical for a kid's cape."

Windy cleared her throat. "Yeah, for sure…"

"…Barter thinks it feels awkward now."

Dusky and Windy both griped with similar 'Yeah-thanks for that' replies.

"You're welcome. Barter needs paint now, but his mom keeps them in her room because he painted on the walls once when he was a little kid."

Windy giggled. "That was like, just last year."

"That's what he said," Barter refuted, "When Barter was a little kid."

Dusky and Windy shared a grin with zipped lips, deciding it nicer not to burst the boys bubble.

Barter zipped past his dad, soon skidding to a stop in front of Opol.

"What do you think?" The monk inquired.

Barter's face pursed with confusion. "You're just wearing a hat now."

"I see, I will be right back." He sped away to make some wardrobe changes.

With Windy behind him, Dusky asked, "Was Opol wearing a hat?"

"Yup." Barter skipped over to his mom's door and knocked. "*Mom!* Barter needs *paints*!"

Daria hollered, "One minute!"

"…Barter thinks you're taking too long."

Daria firmly shouted, "Do not open that door young man!"

Barter's weakness to patience took less than a minute to set in. "*Mom?* Barter needs paints still…"

"Tough shit!"

Barter gasped. "Mom, that's not okay to say…"

"Don't care! You're the one who started all this different stuff, so deal with it!"

Dusky chuckle-hummed, "I don't think you can argue with that."

Windy skipped her amusement. "Excuse me boys," she said as she slinked inside Daria's room to, hopefully, alleviate her exacerbated tone.

Barter and Dusky sighed in unison at the feminine rambling behind the door.

The helpful father dawned a thought. "Does spray paint count?"

"No," Barter replied with no elaboration as to why. "Mom?! Barter needs paints-because of all the important different things he's doing…"

Daria's door cracked just enough for her angrily pursed face to pop out. "Don't even try that crap, *young man*. You can wait-and don't you dare say it."

"But mom——"

"You're saying it anyways——"

"Barter has to beat the bad guys to the

punch."

Daria's face tiredly askew for a second. "Oh-knock it off Barter. It's not like we're living in a comic book where time is of the essence because the villain's evil plot is unfolding."



"Okay," Leland sighed as he glanced about his open folder, "So the plan should unfold like this: Annabelle has you set to make a public statement at noon where you'll apply a lighthearted and welcoming outlook on this multi-person candidacy this family is attempting, ignoring and dismissing any and all accusations of fraud or corruption."

Mark replied, "So the usual."

"No," Anabelle the Advisor snipped, "Better than the usual; dress with a little casualness and act the same, smoke some of that medical marijuana before you going on air to seem more down-to-earth and less like an asshole."

Mark's nostrils flared, but his voice stayed calm. "Don't worry, I can pull off *down-to-earth* without that hippy shit."

Annabelle dawned a pre-smirk as she jested, "What about the asshole?"

Mark inappropriately answered, "Usually I refrain, but I am a gentleman willing to indulge your whims."

"Gross," Annabelle croaked.

"Your legal counsel seconds that. Can we get back to the matter at hand?"

Mark pompously waved the meeting on.

Leland continued to lay out their villainous plot. "As I was saying, we'll keep this press conference short and sweet.

Also, Annabelle has informed me that the Colonel has people working on stopping this Diana Folknor and gouging this video of theirs from the media. And *I* have already greased the legal gears to quicken or slow any speedbumps we may come across."

Annabelle felt it prevalent to point-out, "It is very important that we all limit our media exposure; so as to avoid this villain persona they've placed upon the Mayor."

Mark loudly scoffed. "Right, because we're not sitting here going over our plan to destroy a family…"

Annabelle grimaced at him. "Please, good and evil are just different spins on the same played out campaign for control."

Leland lunged forward in his chair with laughter. "I do like the way this one thinks. After all, one man's family is another man's terrorist cell."

Mark decided to distastefully add, "Especially if you change the color of their skin."

"Ugh," Annabelle unhappily harked, "I hate having to agree with goblins like you guys."

Mark smirked from ear to ear. "Oh please, playing with monsters like us is what a girl like you lives for."

Annabelle nonchalantly shrugged, because even the awful understand honesty. "Guilty as charged."

Leland said, "Those are three words that no client of mine has ever uttered."

"That's why he cost so much," Mark jabbed.

Leland the Lawyer lobbed his folder closed. "My fees are what they are, because

in a world managed by economies all that matters is cost."



"Oh-I don't care how much that cost," Daria prominently huffed. "Just rip it off of it." She was too busy posing for the mirror to care about something as superficial as cost.

Windy shrugged and ripped the baby-blue fabric flower from the old prom dress. "Damn, that came off easy." The fashion familiar girl hunted down the tag. "Yup, made in China."

"*Flower please*," Daria sang as she stood strong before her once frilly, now torn-sleek wedding gown. Her colorful wrap was similarly torn from an old Halloween costume and flowed around her waist to her liking. She pulled a secret safety pin from her hair and pinned the baby-blue fabric flower to her left shoulder.

Windy gave an approving nod. "I like it."

Daria's unexpected grin grew into a smile. "Huh… Me too."

A cluttered crash caught their ears.

Daria regretfully reasoned, "I'd better go check on that."

"Why," Windy chuckled, "Because it's not gonna be Barter making a big mess? Give the kid a second to fix his mess himself."

Daria dropped one of the proudest, confused grins she'd ever known. "Now that is some solid mom-advice right there. *So*, wanna play with jewelry?"

"Mom, that's *literally* the best idea *ever*."



"That is literally the worst idea I've ever heard," Annabelle adamantly insisted.

Leland scoffed. "Why is brunch the worst idea ever?"

Annabelle wide-eyed the both of them and harped, "Not that, the thing after that you apes."

Mark asked, "You mean when I inquired about having a hitman kill that entire family or maybe just the kid?"

"Yes!" She barked at the both of them.

Leland queried, "Aside from the risk of us being the first obvious suspects, what was the problem again?"

Annabelle growled, "I don't know anybody that would kill a child and I don't think I want to."

Leland lecherously laughed. "Oh please, I'm sure there's plenty of gutter trash willing to put one between the eyes of some mentally ill child; just sell them on it being an angel of death kinda gig."

Mark's nasty smirk sat solid upon Annabelle's displeased face. "Don't you go and start getting all girly on us now, Annabelle. I know your ovaries are just tingling at the thought of hurting that little retard, but we need to set up that contingency. After all, we are dealing with the potential political future of our nation."

"Eh," Leland passively replied, "That may be a bit of a stretch, but if this family *actually* managed to win this election there would most certainly be an unfortunate mass-effect. Other cities and even states

would begin doing the same, removing our officials from the places they need to be."

Annabelle's nostrils flared with a deep sigh. "Fine, the next time I speak with my uncle I'll have him give—*someone* a call. Just have the necessary untraceable currency ready for a drop, because I'm not dealing with that crap."

"Understood," Mark said with a cold tone.

Leland cleared his throat. "Can we get back to the matter at hand now?"

"Brunch?" Mark hopefully hummed.

Annabelle groaned, "No, the media mess right in front of us."



Dusky and Barter stared at the musty mess right in front of them.

"Huh," Barter hummed, "So that's what was in that closet."

Dusky knew it and said it, "Dude, we're so gonna have to clean this up."

"Barter doesn't really wanna do that…"

"*Yeah*, Dusky doesn't either."

Barter looked up at his dad with a curious squint. "Why're you talking like that? Barter thinks it's weird."

Dusky wisely decided to leave that one be. "Well, either way your mom's gonna make both of us clean it up."

Barter suggested, "What if we shove it all back inside and close the door real fast?"

"I like that idea."

They both took their bulldozing positions and bashed the broken toys and other forgotten kiddy-tatter back into the

closet!

Dusky slammed the door shut! He and Barter sharing a belated laugh. They swung silent Lemur-looks of guilt at Daria's opening door.

"And just what are you two doing?"

They both shook their heads, Barter yammering, "Nope not Barter, nope," while Dusky profusely sang, "*Nothing at all*, seriously, nothing…at all, *nothing*…"

Daria crossed her arms at them; her daughter doing the same in backup. "Yeah-huh, I'm betting that closet you're leaning against has a different tale to tell."

Dusky decided to wisely change the subject. "I love the new look. Why does that dress look familiar?"

"Barter really likes it too. He thinks its matches your inner verb-viburnt-*vibrancy*, cause of the colors and stuff."

Daria gushed. "Well thank you both very much, but I'm still gonna open that closet."

Barter took the distraction this time. "Where's your new outfit, Goth Windy?"

"Nope," Windy refused, "Gonna have ta know what's up with the closet too."

Barter flipped fast on his old man. "It was dad's idea."

"Dude?!"

The mischievous father and son were saved by the bell; or screaming stranger to be more accurate.

Windy casually pointed-out to the perturb-faced bunch of them, "One of you adult people might wanna go do something about that."

Daria and Dusky dashed off, Daria harping at Barter to stay put.

Barter listened to his mother's

warning, but only so he could rightly decide not to listen to it at all as he ran off.

Windy sighed. "Well, I guess I should go too…" Her eyes turned to Barter's room and the secret outfit she'd started working on days ago hidden in Barter's closet, because the kid never ever used it due to it being scary looking. Windy's feet followed her eyes.

Everyone was stopped, watching as a hat-wearing Opol dragged a well-dressed husky man towards the front door by his ponytail!

The man furiously spouted, "Let me go! I work for the state! You can't—" His anger-face ended as his bearded visage painfully plopped against the door!

Opol moved the larger man like a yoyo as he opened the door and shoved him out onto his butt!

The man brutally barked from the ground, "I'll have you thrown in jail and this house condemned!"

Opol strode from the doorway and stood over the man with the daunting glare of a powerful protector. "You would ruin the lives of this family for a paycheck?"

"What!? No, I, you—it is illegal to place your hands on a federal employee."

"Is it not illegal to break into a home and threaten the family there?"

The man stammered as the question conflicted in his head. "I don't-I don't—you don't—"

"If it is not, than it should be. Whomever sent you here is wrong, and these people will prove that today. So leave here and go find out for yourself." Opol briskly swept away and slammed the front door,

leaving the man strongly rethinking early retirement. He turned from locking the door to meet 3 sets of crossed arms. "What?"

Daria quacked, "What do you mean what?! You know what!"

Opol asked, "You mean the large man I forcefully threw out the door?"

They all gave wide-eyed nods.

"He broke in through an unlocked window and claimed to be some sort of state worker or something."

Dusky speculated, "Was he though?"

"I did not ask, I was too busy throwing him out of our home…I mean, your home."

"Barter doesn't need a dictionary to know that 'our' was the right word."

Opol blushed a little with a subtle throat-clear. "Well…I am honored. Where has Windy gone?"

Dusky could've sworn she was right behind him. "Good question. I could've sworn she was right behind me."

Daria grumbled at him, "Smoke less pot Dusky."

He shrug-nodded in agreeance with her. Little did she know that he often did smoke less, but only when he wasn't smoking more…

Goth Windy stepped out into the living room and loudly cleared her throat, fists propped up on her hips; hero-style. The heroine was harlequin in purple and black, starting from her long black boots, one splattered purple with nail-polish, past her checkered skirt and all the way across her sewn-together button up shirt.

Dusky approvingly nodded. "Very cool."

"Barter likes it very much."

Daria walked up to Windy and did up an extra anti-cleavage button on her daughter's

shirt. "Now it's perfect."

Before Windy could roll her eyes, she 'ooh' instead. "I almost forgot." Windy quickly slapped on a purple and black tiara made of lace. "What a ya think? Neat huh? Believe it or not I ripped it off an old fairy costume I had as a kid."

"Cool!" Barter blurted.

Daria rubbed her forehead and grumbled to herself, "I can't believe I'm stuck with the family that wears costumes and capes."

"Ooh! Barter wants a crown too."

"No," Daria replied with the utmost certainty.

Barter's face assumed the usual huffy and pre-pissy explosion expression of an 8 year old, but he took a deep breath and sighed. "Okay-fine, Barter will just have a cape. Ooh-can you get Barter the paints, *please?*"

"Of course." Daria's nose suddenly drifted down at her son. "When was the last time you washed that outfit?"

"Barter hasn't ever washed it yet…wait, maybe one times."

Daria rolled her eyes along with everyone else. "Yeah that sounds about right…"

Dusky eased over by Opol and whispered, "You're still just wearing a hat dude."

Opol, unfamiliar with the art of secrecy, replied at full volume, "Is my new hat not suitable?"

They all lovingly laughed at him; unaware that fashion-impairment was a common condition with monks.

Super Daria took the reins of the fun mess that was her wonderful family. "Okay, Barter you better go throw those clothes in

the wash and take a shower. Dusky, start getting things ready for us to leave please."

Dusky tossed up a casual salute along with his grin. "Yes ma'am."

Daria returned his grin. "Love the suit by the way, looks familiar… Anyways, Windy and I will take off Opol's clothes and help him express himself through fashion."

Opol dawned a truly worried brow-slump.

Daria continued. "Okay, everyone meet back here in like 20 minutes. And—GO!"

They all frantically fumbled around one another in exuberated enjoyment.

"Wait!" Barter suddenly shouted and stopped their stumbling. "Barter has to van-vanquish a brown monster." The boy gripped his villainous belly-rumble before skittering off to the bathroom.

Opol asked, "Is 'brown monster' a metaphor for poop or bad guys?"

Dusky snort-chuckled. "Only if you consider hunks of corn henchmen."

"*Gross*," Windy and Daria replied in unison.



"*Gross*," Annabelle interrupted. "The hunks of organic corn in my crap later would make better henchmen than those two."

Leland laughed, because he loved an educated woman with a nasty mouth and she did have corn on her salad earlier.

Mark groaned, "I don't care if they're idiots or not, they're an easy, untraceable hire that could level the playing field; they'll make it look like a mugging."

Annabelle crossed her arms. "They are

Neanderthals that I wouldn't hire to headbutt a wall…okay maybe head-butting a wall, but that's it."

"Also," Leland interjected, "The Jacob brothers are both currently incarcerated for premeditated assault…"

Mark huffed, "*Oh*… Well, never mind then. what if——"

"For the last time," Annabelle wickedly purred, "The Colonel's connections will take care of all the minutia. Everything is arranged, this little family of rebels won't last the day after we're done with them…"

Day 14
Accumulated Campaign
-The Valiant Villain-

Dusky stepped back from the van and sighed a pleased sigh; backpacks, purses, and snacks safely stacked about. "Alright, van loaded." He turned around and froze in place, taking only a second to recognize the barrel of a gun pointed point-blank at his forehead.

The burly man growled with a deep voice, "Show me where the money and pot is or I splatter your brains over the side of your rape-van, chomo."

Dusky's voice anxiously cracked, "Dude- I don't even know who chomo is-take whatever you want."

The man's gruff and lightly-scarred face pursed with a vicious disgust. "Oh-the only thing I hate more than a kid-fucker is a lying one…"

"No-wait! I'm not a—" Dusky gasped and shut his eyes as he saw a mini-bat whirring through the air at the side of his head, a dull 'thwap' echoing! With no pain to be had in the adrenaline fueled second, Dusky's eyes shot open to the confusing sight of a gun and a girl. He fumbled backwards into the van, due to the large caliber firearm still in his face.

Goth Windy gave the confuse-browed, brick-haired thug a confident glare before yanking the little bat she'd caught bare-handed from his husky-grasp!

The man's gun arm swung away from Dusky and towards the girl, Opol's black leather sandal-clad foot pinning the man's arm to the half-open van door before he could take aim!

Windy whaled over the mugger's leg with the bat till he dropped to a knee, while Opol knocked the gun from his grasp and punted it into a nearby drainage grate!

The man angrily shoved the both of them away like pestering children. "Dammit! That was my favorite gun. Now I'm gonna have to hurt all of ya." A lengthy switchblade sprung out in his palm at the same time his eyes went wide with shock.

Daria's foot fell away from the back of the man's crotch at the same time he keeled over on all fours. "No one's gonna hurt my family!"

The man swung a perturbed grimace back at the assaulter of his family jewels. "Daria?!" He curiously croaked.

Daria's rage-face flipped friendly, "Spider?" She turned to the three members of her family about to bash Spider's head in with various objects and shouted, "Wait! He's a friend!"

Dusky squawked in refute, "*No!* He was gonna shoot me in the face! And he called me a chimichanga or somethin!"

Still hunched over, Spider hoarsely scoffed. "Please, I only kept that gun as an equalizer; haven't fired the thing in ten years."

Dusky harped, "That doesn't make me feel better."

"Wait," Spider interlude, "This child molester is a member of your family?"

Windy couldn't help the nervous 'HA'

that slipped out.

Even Opol chuckled after Daria grumbled to them, "Sounds like we were off with the hobo thing."

A defeated Dusky threw his hands into the air at his family's unhelpful hubbub. "Will one of you please clear my name so the big biker doesn't try to kill me again?!"

Daria giggled. "*Fine*, don't get your panties in a bunch." She held her hand out to Spider and he took it. "Sorry Mr. Spider, but this man isn't whatever someone else told you he is."

The baffled biker stood with a groan N' grunt. "You look very pretty in that dress, and are you saying this hippy weirdo isn't a pedophile?"

"Thank you," Daria approved.

"Hey?!" Dusky disapproved.

Daria continued. "And *yes* that's what I'm saying. I've known Dusky a long time and he's into the petite gals, but not that petite."

Spider's nostrils flared as he seethed with pessimism. He glanced around at the colorful crew, needing a double-take for the monk with a Lone Ranger-white cowboy hat. "I'm sorry, but the people that hire me know not to lie to me; it's my one damn rule, because when ya break it I break you."

While the rest of them kept a cautious distance, Daria patted him on the shoulder. "Sorry Spider, but there's some really bad people trying to crap on my family and I doubt they care about stuff like lying."

"Why?" Spider genuinely inquired.

A series of open mouths and no answers cascade among them.

Thankfully, Awesome Opol had the plain-

Jane answer that Spider needed. "Because this family is trying to make a better city for the people and not those in charge."

A second of silence later and a grin struck Spider's face along with a chortle. "Oh-yeah they fuckin hate that; aint no money in happy and healthy people."

"Apparently," Dusky huffed in exhausted relief.

Spider tossed a guilty palm atop the back of his head. "*Ooh*, damn it, sorry there family; I was gonna kick his teeth in on the curb."

Dusky grumbled, "I didn't need ta know that…"

"It's fine," Daria casually dismissed to Dusky's chagrin.

"RRRAAAAHHH!" Barter screamed as he burst out of the house in his tighty-whiteys, swinging a broom and dawning a cape! He bravely bellowed, "You're going down bad guy!" The brazen boy's family cringed in shock as he whacked the broom handle across the side of Spider's scruffy head!

The big biker's nose twitched as he blinked a little like he were irked, but uninjured. "Hey, aint you that kid from the news?"

"Yeah!" Barter replied with rage, cocking back the broom for another swing.

Thankfully, the family had the boys back as they all interjected with a series of insistent stops and repetitive no's.

Barter's shoulders slumped in disappointment. "But Barter saw him fighting all of you!? And he even looks like a bad guy!"

Super Daria quickly and clearly

clarified. "It was a misunderstanding. Other bad guys lied to him, so he's actually kind of a good guy."

"*Yeah*," Windy said, "Good guy might be a stretch considering he gets paid to beat people up… No offense, Mr. Spider."

His leather-jacketed chest rose and fell in humility. "None taken, I aint one O' them liars you spoke of. And I only beat up people that deserve it."

"Oh," Barter chipperly said, "That's okay then."

Dusky and Daria croaked, "No it isn't!"

Daria took the wheel though. "It is never okay to beat people up, okay sweetie?"

"Never okay to beat people up?" He reiterated in confusion. "Barter thinks that's a rule somebody who needs to be beat up made up." He grinned wide. "That was fun to say."

Daria gasped in defeated annoyance, while the others held their laughter but not their grins.

Spider chortled, "Amen to that little brother." His face flattened as Daria whipped a stern stare over him. Spider cleared his throat and politely said, "Sorry."

She turned back to her frustratingly clever son. "Barter—you—go-get-dressed-right-now-young-man."

Barter's nostrils flared as he took a deep huffy breath, letting it out as he calmly said, "Fine, but Barter is totally right. He knows that if beating up was bad, than that'd make every hero ever doing heroing bad."

Daria managed to beam with pride at the same time she reprimanded him. "No-no, uh-

uh, no way, you do not get to stand around outside in your underwear arguing with your mother."

Barter was defeated by the almighty power of the mom-glare. "Okay mom, Barter's sorry." He turned an adorably ruthless look to the big Biker. "You better not try nothing while Barter's getting dressed…"

Spider was the kind of man that turned most men into puddles of their former selves. So being talked down by a mere boy in his undies and a cape sent the kind of humble hush through his defensive mind that he'd seldom known. "Ya have my word."

Barter just assumed that meant 'yes' as he zipped off, cape flapping behind his kid-quick pace.

Within the hardened fist-for-hire's momentarily stymied mind he grasped at the phrase ironically painted down the back of the boy's cape, whispering it to himself. "Not every hero wears a cape…" For a man like Spider there were few times in life that he'd felt the desire for difference; reserved to the aspect of vengeance he'd turned himself into… "Boy!" He called out.

Barter did a dramatic whip-around.

Spider asked, "Did you paint that on your cape?"

Barter smiled and nodded.

"Why?" Spider worrisomely inquired.

"That's easy, Barter wrote it because it's true."

Opol broke the 10 second silence as he huffed with amusement, "Well this is an eventful morning."

With Spider's thuggish senses noticing the journalist recording them from a bush 50 feet away, he decided to toss his entire

life into turmoil; mainly because it sounded kinda fun. He clearly and boldly spoke for all to hear. "The people that hired me under false pretenses to assault you did so from a phone number that my private line decrypted was coming from City Hall."

Everyone turned their ears to the sound of police sirens upon the brightening horizon.

Spider burst into laughter as the reality of this most recent contract struck him. "Looks like my employer didn't plan on lettin any of us get outta here."

It was Barter's turn to speak boldly and whatnot. "Mr. Spider, Barter's family needs to get out of here to save the city from the bad guys running it. Can you help us?"

Spider's chest fluttered with the same certainty it always did in the face of a good contract, but this wasn't any normal contract. "I can, but I'm a man with a creed. I need payment."

"Barter has no pants…"

Dusky pulled an ugly, linty wad of 1's from his pocket. "Is this enough?"

Spider's perturbed brow said that it was not.

Before Barter could race inside for a fistful of cash, Daria blurted, "One date!" She now had everyone's attention, so she raised a chin and crossed her arms. "You can take me on *one* date, no weird stuff, just dinner, and you're paying. Deal?"

A big smile pushed its way through the natural chagrin of Spider's face. "Deal, but I suggest ya'll hurry and get in that van."

"Yay!" Barter yelled. "Welcome to the team Super Spider, or Stupendous Spider, or

maybe Striking Spider, or——"

Dusky and Daria interrupted with an adamant, "Go get dressed!"

Barter ran off to get dressed before he found himself the cause of their current conundrum once again.

Spider gently cleared his throat, "I kinda liked Super Spider…"



The beastly engine rumbled like a lion beneath the stainless steel and chrome creature that was Spider's ape-hanger-handled Harley. He turned a worrisome glare to the clunky-clicking start of the van behind him. "Hey! That thing don't sound right! Ya'll got a different car!?"

Dusky passively shouted back, "She'll be fine! There's no check-engine light!"

Sitting in the passenger seat and long since privy to Dusky's dumb, Daria had to ask, "Does that light even work?"

Dusky innocently hummed, "I thought those always worked."

Barter hopped up from the back and harped, "Let's go *Dad*," as he pointed to Spider revving off in front of them.

Dusky's van jerked and jumped, but it drove.

Before their courageous caravan could even reach the intersection, a swarm of cop cars curved around the end of the block; lights on and sirens blaring. The van's screechy brakes jostled it to a stop as Spider's stay silent beneath his metal beast's baroque.

The ever-brave biker looked back at the van, steely gaze falling upon Daria. Spider

blew her a kiss.

Daria blushed and gasped as they all watched the real life action-movie scene unfold before them.

Spider sped off through his own billow of white smoke as he yanked a tall can of beer from one of his saddlebags!

The ascending authorities skid and skirt to a halt before the Super Spider and the metallic monster he rode.

Spider whipped the rear of his bike around once, uncapping the thoroughly shook-up booze and blasting foam over the vehicles as he faced them. Spider gulped down the remaining alcohol and laughed at the officers shocked faces. "Well pigs!? Let's do this shit! CATCH ME IF YA CAN!"

Smoke poured everywhere as the chrome creature fish-tailed and spat in denial of the politician pandering justice system!

Spider's utterly enthused laughter lashed past the van as a slew of sirens sang by but seconds later.

Dusky's van deeply putt-putt as they all sat in it with their jaws dropped for a few seconds.

Opol cleared his throat and suggested, "Perhaps we should move forward again?"

"Yup," Windy seconded.

Dusky took a deep breath, shook off the police anxiety, and kept driving.

A turn later and Barter just had to say, "That was the coolest thing that's ever happened in Barter's life."

They all chuckled and giggled together on that note; that is until the van 'kerchunk' and whirred to a dead stop with Dusky struggling to turn the wheel so it'd drift towards the curb.

The vehicle stopped and Daria instantly harped, "What the Hell Dusky?!"

Dusky sighed and shrugged. "My bad… Oh-hey-look, the check-engine lights on."



Hood now open and not a one of them knowing what they were looking at, the situation had reached its boiling point.

Dusky tossed his hands into the air as he stomped about the sidewalk in defeat. "Why didn't I ever learn how to fix this thing?! What am I saying? I didn't even know if a stupid light in it worked!"

Windy turned to their stoic monk ally and asked, "Is there anything you can do?"

Opol laughed a little. "You are serious, forgive me. I assumed—never mind. No I am afraid I cannot, vehicle mechanics is not a usual area of learning offered in monasteries."

"It's *your* van, *Dusky*," Daria bitched at him. "You should know something about fixing it."

Dusky unhelpfully droned, "*Well I don't, so*—yeah."

"Barter thinks arguing is a stupid superpower, try using different ones." The boy was met with two peeved parental-powered stares complete with hands upon hips.

An old amber'ish-colored Cadillac cruised up beside all of them. Adorned as though a side-character in Shakespeare's Macbeth, landlord Lory projected, "You folks look like you're havin car trouble." She lowered her out-of-place purple glasses to their grumpy faces. "Need me ta call a tow dearies?" The ensuing slew of sneaky smiles

made her a little worried.

"Lory!" Daria happily shouted, then slinked right up to the window. "*Hey*. So, remember how you said if we ever needed anything ta let you know"—she strategically side-stepped and pointed to her son, who aided with an adorable wave—"Because of my cute crap-talkin son who makes fun of politicians?"

"Um…I did?" Lory felt like she were having a senior moment.

Daria was lying her ass off, but she ran with it. "Yes-so would *you* be *able* to give my *appreciative* and *loving* family a short little ride to Oliver Middle School?"

Lory liked this new fast-talking version of Daria; mostly because she was a half-cocked dingbat herself, but also because it made this scene in her life much more interesting. However, what the family failed to realize was that Lory isn't one of the good or bad guys in a tale… "*Sure*," she casually sang. "I can do that, but I need compensation first."

It took Daria's pre-happy visage a second so grasp what she'd said. "Seriously?"

"But of course," Lory replied as though rehearsing a line. "I am a woman of necessity after all; money and jewelry should do fine."

Daria's brow rose as Lory cackled like a witch trying to steal your puppies. "*Okay*… One sec." She zipped back over to her family. "Okay people, I need money and jewelry."

Barter was the first to ask, "Why?"

Daria rolled her eyes in frustration. She whispered, "Because our landlord is

quirky-just fork over the cash already guys."

Opol raised his hand and said, "Monks don't——"

Daria playfully interrupted, "Oh-you stop it with that monk crap and buy some stuff already."

Windy sighed, "I don't have pockets…"

Dusky grumbled, "I think I have, like, some change. Don't you have money?"

Daria scoffed and 'pashaw' for a moment or two too many. "…I don't have pockets either."

Windy slapped her palm over her mouth as laughter sputtered out from underneath.

Before the purse search began, he said, "Barter has a hundred dollar bill he found…"

They all squinted at the bill waving about and the smiling boy holding it.

Daria knew exactly what to say. "What do you mean you found it?!"

Barter decided not to lie, kind of. "He found it in a shoe…"

"Where?!" Daria squawked.

"On the ground…"

Windy speculated. "*Hold on*, you gave me a hundred dollar bill too…"

Before the questioning could continue, Lory yodel, "The meters a running *dearies!*"

Daria snagged the bill and took it over to Lory. "Will this do?"

"*Ooh*," Lory said in her own voice as she snagged it up, "Mine. Well go on, get your stuff and get in." She watched them pack into her car with their backpacks and purses.

Being lower on the scent totem pole, Barter was a little worried as to why the car smelt like animals yet had no sign of

animals in it…

Lory had but one thing to say, maybe two, as she haphazardly drove off. "I *love* the new outfits; so festive. Also, when did you get a bald cowboy in your family?"

Opol gladly, and simply, explained, "I am actually a monk, and I was somewhat adopted by these wonderful people."

Lory was so enthused with how interesting her drive had become today, she flipped right over to some A Street Car Named Desire. "Well I do declare, *Mr*. Monk. You are a fascinatin peculiarity of *manliness*."

Opol looked just as worried as the others. "Thank you, but would you mind looking at the road while you drive?"

"Only if you acquiesce my need for the attention a single gal may need to continue her day."

Opol had no idea what that meant and truly hoped it only meant talking. For the sake of their lives he quickly replied, "Yes, I agree."

Everyone sighed in relief as Lory looked ahead again and the car drifted back into its lane.

Their dingbat driver decided it time to regel them all with tales they didn't ask to hear. "I once married a cowboy for two weeks, it was a Visa thing. Had ta shave his long golden locks right off cause—actually, I think he was Bulgarian…do ya'll like potatoes?"

DAY 14
Accumulated Campaign
-Academic Allies-

Ms. Yano's bacon-brown eyes beamed as brightly as her yellow-splashed dress with ducks on it. She watched her entire class actively use different learning programs without a spit of guidance from her. For a teacher, teaching a child to learn and think for themselves was the Holy Grail of education.

Mira pranced through the doorway, the bundle of blond she was jiggling and jostling with a purpose. "Ms. Yano, I—are you gonna cry?"

She quietly and politely, "*Shh*, look…"

Mira turned to the creepily content kids. "Yeah, the other teachers felt the same since that computer guy did what he did. Some of em have been using the extra time ta start a fantasy football league."

Ms. Yano ignored most of that. "Have you seen how the software functions? It's amazing, it's like Windows that works. It has a large-print login for kids that consists of an easy to follow desktop with correctional icons to aid in educative understanding of how operating systems work."

Mira's face was blank. "*Um*, *yeah*, I'm an Atari kinda gal… Anyways, the Principal needs ta see ya."

Ms. Yano hummed, "I can't just leave my… Actually, I really could just leave them

here…no-nope, as soon as I walk out something will happen; always does."

Mira gave a nonchalant wave to that. "Don't worry, Ms. Kinnie is on her way to sub-you out for a minute."

Ms. Yano looked around at her content kids for a moment and shrugged. "Lead the way."

Esmerelda's emerald eyes peeked around the edge of a computer. A smirk curved close to her crimson curls as she whispered to herself, "That has to be about Barter…" Esmerelda straightened her rainbow dress like it were a power-suit and stood up to blatantly break the rules.



From the reserved smile of Principal Procrustean to the straight faces of his 3 bureaucratically dressed guests, there was no doubt this was not a friendly meeting.

Ms. Yano stepped into the uncomfortable situation with a chipper attitude. "Good morning everyone. What's going on in here?"

The Principal kindly and dismissively replied, "Ms. Yano, please, have a seat."

In her head, Ms. Yano had sarcastically said, **"Sure, because that answered my question,"** but on the outside she stayed the kind of silent that was expected of her; the same voiceless stigma she'd felt made by those who just wanna talk over everyone.

Principal Procrustean continued the crap he was expected to spout. "These lovely people are from the State Board of Higher Education. They had a few questions and concerns about our many recent curriculum

changes." He felt it a good thing he'd skipped the dash of rum in his coffee this morning, what with all the large words he was having to say.

The older white man, as usual, of the ethnic and gender diverse trio was the designated speaker. "We at the state office are truly thankful for your attempts to better Oliver Middle School, but we have received some worrisome calls about the state of learning here. So—"

Since Ms. Yano wasn't a fan of the expensive-suit-with-a-head's condescending attitude, she interrupted him. "You can just send all those calls directly to me if you'd like."

"*Yes, well*," he belittling droned on, "We believe it best to return to the original tested and proven Ready-Core curriculum, before there's any real negative impact on the children's educational futures."

Principal Procrustean got one glance at Ms. Yano's gasp and headed her off. "We couldn't agree more—"

"Seriously?!" Ms. Yano haphazardly quacked, as the Principal's preemption didn't matter one bit. "*We couldn't agree more*… Have you been drinking again Ted?!"

Theodore Procrustean was the one dawning the gasp now.

The female amongst the tactical trio spoke up as she was trained and well-paid to do. "I completely understand, Ms. Yano. As a woman and a mother, I *also* feel diversity is good in our schools, but introduction of such a thing should be done progressively to ensure the children are not intellectually overwhelmed."

"I agree," the Principal did his best to jump on the bureaucratic bandwagon, "Perhaps if we introduce minor changes to one subject throughout the year?"

Ms. Yano barreled on; behest the borrowed behavior of a boy named Barter. "Really Ted? Do you have to kiss everyone's butt that comes in here besides your own damn teachers?"

Theodore chirped, "Ms. Yano?! I strongly suggest you remember who you work for." He leaned in at her and offensively hummed, "Is it—you know, that time of the month?"

Ms. Yano ignored Ted's idiocy and turned to the trio of token board members. "So what you're telling me is that you want us to tell the thousands of students now excited to learn differently that we're going back to the way they weren't excited to learn?"

The unspoken ethnic spin-man did his thing. "*No*, *no*, *not at all*. Just let the children know that this was an introduction to the alternative-elective courses that will be offered in the future."

Ms. Yano took a deep breath, then gave a stern stare to her boss and her boss's bosses. "I'm gonna go ahead answer both of you"—she turned to Ted first—"I work for the children, like all teachers do and like you *used* to"—she then turned to the trio—"And I will not lie to the people I work for."

The older speaker of them gruffly replied, "Than the state will find a temporary that will fill-in for you."

Ms. Yano calmly hissed, "You'd better not be threating to remove me from my

class…"

The trio's token female defused the situation with a calm hand wave. "Not at all Ms. Yano, we just want what is best for the children; and studies have shown that these drastic changes are not conducive with what *we know* keeps the children psychologically stable and happy."

Until then, Lucian Lurgckwhilletk had been content to eavesdropping, but such an inaccurately applied ideal made him sick to his stomach. "Excuse me," he politely interjected to everyone's surprise, "But the studies in which you have quoted were only referring to negative drastic changes."

Esmerelda raised her chin high beside the esteemed psychologist and said, "He's really smart-so I'd listen to him."

"Thank you," Lucian said before asking, "And who are you?"

"I'm Esmerelda."

Lucian shook her much smaller hand. "Nice to meet you."

The state-empowered woman of the trio scoffed loud and clear. "I'm sorry sir, but this is a private meeting and I'm a certified youth counselor with an associate degree in child psychology."

Lucian could see that Ms. Yano needed the backup and didn't hold back, holding back being his usual action of course. "I possess 4 doctorates, most of which in the field of molecular psychological, and a master's degree in child psychology as well as developmental anthropology."

The supposed counselor looked to the elder spokesman of the trio, who answered with a pre-loaded and stern, "Who is this man and why is he in the school?!"

Ms. Yano gladly answered that one. "He's Dr. Lucian Lurgwal-Loorg-Lu—"

"Lurgckwhilletk."

"Thank you doctor, and he's been *volunteering* his *own* time to help the children with—well, everything from curriculum to grief counseling."

The elder spokesman turned a boldly flat face to the Principal. "I certainly hope you acquired proof of this man's credentials and cleared it with your insurers before letting him around the students, or he won't be the only one removed from the school grounds today…"

Theodore Procrustean had, honestly, not expected such a, literally, bold-faced threat; especially considering his decades of dedication to the school system. He glanced at Ms. Yano and Lucian, realizing that they weren't glaring at him but the trio. Ted, after decades, remembered what side he was supposed to be on. "I did actually"—his back straightened as his tone broadened—"And I even had every single engineer, mathematician, technician, professor, and even *doctor* sign a non-liability sheet for the school's protection."

Lucian stated, "And I contest to that, as well as having witnessed a member of a state organization threating a lesser employee…"

Ted tore on down that self-righteous path with gusto. "Damn right, grow up you three spoiled suits. We exist to teach these children, and you know full well that's exactly what men like Dr. Lurcgwalltok can do better than any of us."

The doctor felt the Principal's attempt

at his name better than most and let it be.

The elder of the trio turned his belittling gaze at Lucian. "Doctor or not, I—"

"*You* is exactly the problem, good sir," Lucian interjected, doing the kinda quick-talking that ended his 1st marriage against the unsuspecting spokesman. "As the lack of consideration you show for the same people who are trying to better the very thing you supposedly work for is indicative of a borderline narcissism undoubtedly caused by the enabling upbringing you have no doubt continued into the marriage with your enabling wife who, due to the smaller fingerprints upon your well-ironed suit, is just as pandering to your socially deconstructive behavior as your overbearing mother was."

As always, after one of Dr. Lurgckwhilletk's personality puncturing presentations, vindictive or not, the room was filled with a silent offense and/or disbelief.

Lucian made sure to push his point before they could find the words. "To put it simply, employees of the state, there are many more accredited professionals willing to publically stand for our right to educate these children. After all, are doctors like me not the kind of people we tell them to aspire to become?"

Being that she was only a kid, Esmerelda supported the adults the best she could with a stern, "I like the school better now too."

While two thirds of the trio tried to get a grasp, grumbling at one another, the elder spokesman stared into the eyes of

child baring more passionate defiance than he could ever remember having. As though dazed, he asked her, "Little girl, why is this school better now?"

His question had turned their attentions and her answer kept them. "It's better because it's different, because when things are the same your brain gets dumb and when they're different it activations the creative sensor in your brain and you get smarter; that's biology-science that a guy with glasses taught us."

The spokesman turned a stoic stare to the Principal and the allying forces he was envious of. "I will do my best to plead your case—"

His female cohort interjected with a stout and stern, "You cannot say that."

The elder spokesman reminded his young tag-alongs why he was their spokesman. "I've been doing this for 30 years and what I say goes, because I'm the only one in this room who knows how to keep our jobs. Because this girl, despite her incorrect grammar, has intellectually proven her point in one fell swoop. State be damned on this one, which is exactly how every non-bitch in every school across the state is going to see this."

Their ethnic ally conservatively whispered, "Not to be a downer, *but* we *were* sent here today to stop all of—well, what you're talking about pleading a case for."

The spokesman put it as plain as he could for the unperceptive understudies. "Do you two cogs-in-the-machine really want to be the ones standing against a small army of PhDs when our nepotism-employed boss gets crushed for sending us here to mess up a mini-educational revolution?"

The two of them looked at one another for a second, then silently shook their heads.

"That's what I thought," the spokesman huffed with vigor in his veins. "Now, I don't mean to be a burden Principal Procrustean, but I may need to borrow one of your volunteers like the Mr. Lort-Lur, like the good doctor here."

Dr. Lurgckwhilletk quelled that query with a quick, "I will be the one accompanying you, as I see no better place for my expertise to be utilized."

The spokesman nodded in agreement, while the counseling degree among the trio tremulously asked, "Why-why? Why do any of—any of this?"

Ms. Yano stole the words right from the esteemed psychologist's mouth. "Because we live in a time when most kids hate being in school. What other choice do we have as teachers? And how the heck can we call ourselves educators when we don't aspire for better than the limits of a state budget or federalized average?"

"Here-here," Lucian loudly seconded, "I could not have said it better myself."

A big bubbly smile busted Ms. Yano's fervent face as she giddily waved at a familiar face just outside the doorway. "Hi Lewy. What're you doing here?"

Luigi nervously cleared his throat, but it didn't aid him in his verbal fumbling. "Uh, hi-hello, um, that-uh was-uh a good speech and um"—he held up the two stack of brown pizza boxes—"P-Pizza?"

"Don't mind if I do," the elder spokesman insisted as stood and snuck out a slice. "If you don't mind, doctor, I'd like

to leave immediately to see what we can do about keeping the volunteers in this school." He stuck his free hand out to Ted. "Thank you for your time, Principal Procrustean. Keep up the good work, and I'll be in touch."

"*Um*," was Ted's first thought, thankfully his second was better. "Thank you sir, I very much will."

As the spokesman shook Theodore's hand, he leaned in and loudly whispered, "On a personal note, I'd give that Ms. Yano of yours whatever she needs to teach; pay raised included."

"Of course," Ted whispered back.

"Well?!" The spokesman harped at the duo to his uno. "Get some pizza and get your butts to the damn car."

They fumbled up, thanking Luigi for the food they didn't want, but eventually would, as they left.

The spokesman leaned over and shook Esmerelda's hand. "It was a pleasure speaking with you, young lady." He took one bite off his slice as he strode out and swung back around to steal another.

Esmerelda and the Principal simultaneously glanced back and forth between the goo-goo-eyed teacher and pizza maker; their last glance at one another.

Ted cleared his throat and said, "Not to interrupt, *Ms. Yano*, but don't you have a class going on?"

"Whoops!" Ms. Yano chirped. "I almost forgot with all the excitement. Come with me Esmerelda." She plopped a gentle palm atop Lewy's chest. "It was really nice seeing you again."

"Yeah-uh," he began to fumble, but soon

saw she was already a stride away. "I took your advice!" He awkwardly croaked, but succeeded in stopping his workaholic love interest. "I replaced all processed, preservative, and salt derivative ingredients with fresh; it was actually easier than I thought it'd be, ha. Anyways"—he flipped open the box to her and a long-since hungrily looming receptionist Mira—"I came up with this uncured-bacon and sundried tomato pizza with a savory garlic white sauce."

Esmerelda popped up to her tippy-toes and lifted her nose above her head.

Ms. Yano's eyes lit up as her sinuses opened to the fresh-baked deliciousness. "Well, maybe just one…actually, would it be okay if I took the rest of this box to my class?"

Lewy handed her the still whole pizza. "You can have this one."

"*Thank you*, that's so sweet…" Ms. Yano's lips sealed beneath her blushing. She dropped the huge pizza atop the Esmerelda barely able to carry it.

Luigi bravely asked, "Maybe, if it's okay, sometime, I could come down to the school and show all the kids how to make homemade mini-pizzas. I-uh, I even came up with a curriculum thing that explains the science behind crust rising and, *um*—and other stuff I can't remember off the top of my head."

Ms. Yano took a deep inhale as she felt warmed by someone wanting to better a part of her world. She pulled out a red sharpie and wrote her number on his pizza box. "Call me and we'll talk."

"Oh, uh, yeah-yes, of course. I'll—"

Lewy's tongue stopped when he realized she was already halfway down the hallway with Esmerelda.

Ted projected, "Come on in here, pizza man," as he pulled a small bottle of rum from his desk and waved it at him. "You look like you could use one of these too."

Lewy sighed and said yes to the situation.

"*Ooh*," Mira cooed as she zipped up behind him. "Just gonna 3rd wheel this little party if ya'll don't mind." She whispered to Luigi, "Don't worry hon, I'm a fun drunk, just a lil handsy, hee-hee."

Lewy sighed again. "Well, I suppose a short siesta couldn't hurt."



A flurry of bills flung back at the taxi driver's face as Anderson exploded from the vehicle! He zipped up the sidewalk and slammed his shoulder into the door! Anderson's body bounced off the wood with his eyes wide and glasses askew. "Ow!" He fixed his glasses first, then loudly pounded on the door. "Please open up! Your family may be in danger! This is Anderson Atwal! I know your son, Barter! Please!" He pounded on the door some more.

A stalking news van slowly pulled up to the curb after the screaming man had thoroughly gotten his attention. Isaiah's redwood eyes and furious facial hair appeared as the window rolled down. "Hey! Who are you and what're you doing!?" Despite being the camera man for Diana Folknor, Isaiah was not as solid a reporter.

Anderson angrily smacked his palms on the door as he heard not a stir inside. "Shit! They're not even here…"

Isiah shouted, "Hey! I'm talking to you!"

He whipped around and uncharacteristically unhinged at the man in the van. "Oh-go frivolously fuck yourself you media drone!"

Isiah's straight face wiped away as he burst into laughter. He switched off the van, hopped out, and headed for the man.

Anderson fumbled a pen from his pocket and held it out like a knife. "Stay back, I know how to use this."

Isiah raised his hands in peace. "*Yeah*, me too? Anyways, just listen to me—"

"Who hired you?!"

Isiah cracked a grin to that inquiry. "Funny story, you see, after my boss lost her mind, I was given a wad of cash by the kid that lives here to drive around and help people; all off the record of course, especially the money and illegal use of this news van part, ha…"

Anderson held his thrust-ready pen as steady as his pessimistic brow.

"Anyways," he rolled right on with the weird kinda week it'd been, "To make a long story as short as it should've been, after nearly getting mugged twice and cussed out a dozen times I'm here to once again ask"—Isiah gave a poorly enthusiastic grin—"Can I help you?"

Anderson slowly lowered the writing utensil. "Did you say Barter gave you a bunch of money?" A concept he was no stranger to.

He nodded. "Yeah-that's the kid. Weird

little sucker, but you gotta respect his—whatever he's got going on."

Anderson finally put the pen away and breathed a sigh of relief. "Well alright then. Do you know where Barter and his family are?"

"Umm, nope. I think they left when all those police were driving around in circles chasing that biker."

Anderson urgently grabbed the man by his shoulders, bursting his own comfort-bubble, and said, "If you have any idea of where they might be, I beg you to take me to them. Their lives could be in danger."

"Umm… What?"

Anderson didn't skip a conspiracy beat as he led Isiah back towards the news van. "There are those within the American Government that fear change and would do anything to stop it in order to maintain their broken bureaucratic systems."

"Umm, what?"

Anderson whipped open the passenger door and said, "You're driving."

"Umm, where?"

"Do you not understand the compounding gravity of the recent sociological shift we have found ourselves adrift upon?!"

"Umm, nope, no I do not, not at all."

Anderson found the grizzly man's frankness curious and stymying. "I see… Unfortunately, I am not the most sociable. Would it help if I told you that I am the one helping Barter better his schools computer program?"

Isiah smiled. "Well why didn't you say so; up until now I half-assumed you were just a raving wacko." He laughed and smacked an uncomfortable Anderson on the back. "Get

in, I'm driving."

DAY 14
Accumulated Campaign
-Cavalry Kids-

The Colonel's limo-tinted two-seater hummed down the freeway with nary a sound, like an unbranded midnight streak. The bushy brown eyebrows above his green-eyes subtly rose as his docked dark-phone rang. "Well that was faster than usual." He put the call through to his car speakers with a tap. "Mr. Spider, I'm assuming the task is finished?"

"Negatory chief!" He shouted over the sound of police sirens. **"HAHAHA! But I am gonna find ya and skin ya alive for lying to—"**

The Colonel calmly hung up the call and poked around his contact list until he found the number he was looking for. He wasn't the kind of man to take failure lying down; for he was a relentless adversary.

The phone rang a few dozen times before an unpleasant older woman picked up and spat, **"What the fuck do you want!? This is a private number!"**

"May I speak with Christopher please?"

"Eh?! You sound like a cop. You a cop!?"

"No ma'am, military."

"Eh… Chris! One of them rag-head-killing vets is on the phone for you! …Chris! Did you hear me?! …The Hell do I know! Said he was military; sounds like one of them baby-raping government pigs."

The Colonel patiently waited through

the sound of the vulgar woman's awfulness.

The speaker rustled as someone else took the phone. **"Who is this? I don't take unsolicited calls-so start talking."**

The Colonel casually replied, "It is good to hear your voice, Private Pariah."

The pale Private's muddy, reddened eyes widened in the small cigarette smoke hued apartment. "C-C-Colonel? Is that you sir?"

"It is and the clearance is: alpha 9, Lesley, Jacob, Andrew, Christopher. And I have a mission only you can get done…"

Chris dropped the freshly opened bottle of whiskey he was about to drowned himself in and tossed a stiff salute up to his graying brow. "S-Sir!"

The Colonel dawned a devious grin at the soldier's willing tone.

"You'd better clean that shit up Chris!"

"I would be honored to once again serve my country! Sir!"

"Good."

"Why don't ya serve the floor by cleanin that shit up!"

"The mark is a terrorist group posing as a family with the last name Davidson that has begun unfolding their plot using the media and your city; the time frame is urgent."

"Chris! Are you listening to me!? Clean my floor you stupid faggot!"

Private Pariah pulled a putrid throw pillow from the vulgar woman's filthy chair, ignoring her annoyance of him doing so. "And the means?" He asked as he nonchalantly shoved the pillow over her face, jerking her head back into the recliner!

"Self-provided."

Chris's face stayed straight as the weaker old woman futilely flailed. "Understood. And the prerogative?"

The Colonel's coldness rang through the phone, **"Exterminate the marks with extreme prejudice, avoid collateral deaths with emphasis on the bald ambassador, and avoid capture at all costs."**

"Understood. I won't fail you sir, but-uh"—he glanced down at the pillow he no longer had to hold—"It appears I have killed my mother…"

"That is fine, she is not crucial to the mission."

He resumed his salute and replied, "Understood sir! Thank you for this opportunity!"

The Colonel hung up the call, but glanced back down at the unused phone. "*Hmm*, perhaps that was a rash call… Oh well, it is a fool who takes his foe lightly."



Esmerelda literally looked like she was about to die from boredom. Not that anything they were doing in this crazy computer class was boring.

Ms. Yano giddily clapped her hands as she pressed a button on a student's computer and the message 'Hello!' appeared on everyone's screens. "And just like that you can all message and even talk to each other *by*—using the wireless antenna in the computers, like this little program just taught me. Huh, neat."

Esmerelda tossed up her hand and impatiently projected, "Ms. Yano, I have to

use the bathroom…"

Ms. Yano eagerly replied, "Use the computer message thing to tell me over here on Ruby's computer."

Esmerelda stared at the screen for a few seconds and raised her hand again. "I can't, I wasn't paying attention…"

The savvy teacher queried, "Do you really have to use the bathroom or are you just trying to sneak off to look for Barter again?"

A couple of the younger girls cooed at Esmerelda and sang about the two of them kissing in trees.

"Shut up!" Esmerelda yelled at her own friends.

"*Esmerelda?!*" Ms. Yano mom-voiced.

"Sorry, I really do have to pee…"

Ms. Yano's brow arched with stern. "Is that all though?"

"…Yes?"

Ms. Yano shook her head. "Nope. You're gonna have to take a buddie. Ruby? Since you're class leader this week, would you be Esmerelda's bathroom buddie for me?"

The plaid uniformed Ruby eagerly hopped to the task, head full of bustling dark braids. "This girl's gotcha back Ms. Yano."

"I'll take that as a yes, now you two hurry back."

Ruby and Esmerelda spryly sprung out the door into the hallway.

Not a minute later, Esmerelda said, "I'm totally sneaking off now, *bye*."

Ruby leapt in front of her. "No way, I'm not getting in trouble cause you've gotta crush on Barter and wanna be a slut."

Esmerelda's brow preemptively arched. "I don't know what that is, but it makes me

think I should be mad and ignore you." She stepped around her to continue her optimistic delinquency. "Ow!" Esmerelda immediately hollered as her head jerked back, striding stopped before it could start.

Ruby released her handful of bouncy red curls, hands hopping to her hips and chin righteously rising.

Esmerelda's gasping face said it all. "Did you just pull my hair?!"

Ruby held her ground. "Yes, because you're stupid-and I'm not gonna get in trouble for you being stupid-so I'm gonna go tell on you." She turned away with ample attitude. "Ow!"

Esmerelda let go of the handful of braids she'd tugged on.

Ruby's gasp said it all this time. "You did not just pull my hair?!"

"Actually, I did totally pull on your greasy monkey-braids."

Ruby gasped even greater. "That's racism!" She squeaked.

"What?!" Esmerelda squeaked back. "Grease and monkey's aren't racism. Your racism for saying something is racism."

Ruby wrathfully refuted, "Wait-I can't be racism!"

"Why?!"

Ruby's mouth opened with anger and shut with confusion. She hummed, "I think telling you why might be racism too…"

"See! I told you racism is when someone talks about racism."

Ruby cleverly snipped, "Doesn't that make you racism too then?!"

Esmerelda opened her mouth and huffed it shut. "Damn it, it does… Okay-okay,

Esmerelda's sorry for saying things that're—you know, the *R* word."

Ruby sighed, "Fine, I'm sorry too… Wait, did you just say your name like Barter does?"

"What? No…"

Ruby pointed a dramatic finger at her. "You totally did! You're a liar and a racism."

Esmerelda returned said finger of drama. "Ooh! You said the R word again-you're such an R word."

"But I'm—I can't—urgh! Okay fine, how about we both be black so neither of us can be racism…I-*mean* the *R* word?"

Esmerelda pondered the concept, at least for the 2 seconds an 8 year old could. "Can I say stuff like 'sista' or 'homegirl' and 'ya'll'?"

Ruby wasn't sure if that was an R word thing too, but honestly didn't care anymore. "Sure-whatever."

"Awesome. So what's the plan, my sista?"

Ruby simply replied, "Bathroom and back to class."

She wanted to argue with her, but she had to pee now. "Okay, bathroom and then we discuss the plan."

"Whatever-weirdo."

They started walking again as Esmerelda chirped, "You're weird too you know?"

Ruby nodded in agreement. "Yeah, but my momma says: If ya own yer weird it's just personality."

Esmerelda whipped a shocked expression to her bathroom buddie. "That's like—really smart…" She gasped with insight. "You're like a super-smart nerd-person, that's why I

thought you were a weirdo."

"Yeah-I-guess, I'm like, kinda smart cause of grades and stuff, but what does that have to do with being weird?"

Esmerelda cleared her throat. "Nothing…"

Ruby loudly scoffed at her. "Whatever, stuck-up girls like you don't know nothin cause you don't read books."

"*Please*, I totally read books; just not at school, because that's sad."

Smart or not, Ruby had no idea what she meant. "Okay?"

"Have you read any"—she lost her words as her eyes turned and her feet stopped to the hallway before the bathrooms—"Did you hear that?"

"Nope just the sound of your v—"

'Kachunk'!

Ruby quickly changed her answer, "Yes."

They both jumped a little as the maintenance door at the end of that hallway burst open with a restrained 'thud'!

Esmerelda and Ruby's faces widened in shock at what they saw.

A clean-shaven man in a black suit slinked through and carefully shut the door.

The girls both tilted their head to oddly long and slender case hanging off his back.

Thankfully, Ruby had the sense to grab Esmerelda's opening mouth and scuttled the both of them behind a wall.

The man's muddy, reddened eyes turned to the squeak he thought he'd heard, but the hall was empty. The familiar pale man, face once covered in much more graying hair, swiftly yanked open the adjacent door. The camouflaged in clean-shaven Chris took one

more glance around before disappearing up the stairs.

Ruby squawked, "What the crap was that about?!"

Esmerelda seriously said, "We have to do something."

Ruby's face was fervent with frustration. "Are you crazy!?" She squeaked. "We are *not* chasin down some psycho with a gun case-we're telling a tea——"

"So that *was* a gun case thingy."

Ruby huffily harped, "Of course it was! Read more books!"

A familiar girl nasally croaked, "Did you say gun?!" She was gowned in ill-fitted pink and black checkers and occasional bleach-burnt bang flicks.

Her gothic-garbed goons shared exacerbated scoffs about it.

Esmerelda enthusiastically jabbered, "What's up ya'll? I totally did-cause there was a guy who-like went smashing through the door-and he even looked like a bad guy-and he was like *weirdly* old to be sneaking into a school-and he went up the stairs." She took a needed breath, wrapped an arm around her bathroom buddie, and finished with, "That's why Ruby and I are gonna go stop him."

Ruby choked, "We're what now?!"

One of Mandy's unpleasant allies in rebellion spat, "They're just stupid kids playing a stupider game; screw them."

Mandy turned a judgmental gaze down at the two girls arguing over what was and wasn't too dangerous. "Hey! You little brats for real? Or are ya just baby-pretending?"

Ruby angrily harped, "Why has no one gone to tell a teacher yet?!"

Esmerelda answered, "100% for real ya'll; I wouldn't lie to a homegirl."

"What?!" A confused Mandy said.

Ruby huffed, "She's not lying; you teenagers are so damn dumb."

Mandy shook her head and bang-flipped in frustration. "Then why haven't you two diaper-wearing dorks told a teacher yet?!"

Esmerelda sassily shouted, "Because Esmerelda is too busy talking to stupid teenagers! And she thinks your clothes are too small for your body!"

Ruby had to say it. "Okay, that time I totally heard you talking like Barter. Why're you doing that?!"

Esmerelda deadpan to the silent group staring at her, even an offended Mandy patiently waited. "I dunno! Maybe cause"—she gave into honesty with a grim groan—"Maybe cause I wanna be someone who changes the world instead of makes it worse; like I always do by being a bitch…"

"Righteous," Mandy's formerly silent friend hummed.

Mandy turned to her tag-along allies. "I want you two to go tell principal-pompous what's going on."

They both scoffed different version of, "Why us?"

Mandy barked, "Because I said so ya dumb skanks! You idiots wanna get shot dead by a psycho?!"

"No," the goths grumbled as they slinked away.

Mandy projected to her idiotically idle friends, "Go faster!" She turned back to the girls after seeing her steps pep-up. "Okay girls—"

"I'm Esmerelda and this is Ruby."

"Mandy," she replied as she pulled a switchblade from her cleavage and popped it open along with the girl's eyes. "So, which way did this wacko go?"

They both pointed to the door down the hallway.

"Cool. You kiddies should go back to class now." Mandy walked off to skewer her some psycho, because in all reality Mandy was a very impulsive young woman.

Esmerelda put her brazen expression right in front of Ruby's face.

"Nuh-uh, no. There's no way we're gonna go help her fight a guy with a gun, that's crazy."

"But what if she needs our help?"

Ruby really hated Esmerelda right now. "Crap, fine. Let's go do a plan…" The actual plan was to let Mandy lead the way.

Esmerelda eagerly followed her towards the stairs.

"Mandy!?" Ruby said as they caught her just before she disappeared up the stairs. "We're gonna help."

Mandy grimaced at that for a few bang-flicks. "How?"

Esmerelda explained. "*Yeah*, we read books, we're good."

Mandy respected their impulsiveness for some reason, that being because she was unaware of her own. "Alright, follow me and find a weapon."

Ruby felt her excitement beginning to spike. "Do you read books too, Mandy?"

"For sure; especially the nasty sexy ones, but only because they never make those into movies…and the sex. I hate it when they make a movie out of a book and change people's ethnicities and shit."

Esmerelda gasped. "That's totally racism. Wait, is it?"

Ruby matter-of-factly replied, "It *totally* is. My mom says that rich movie people are just tryin to sell stuff to everyone, that's why they ignore original stories and stick us together like a fruit salad. …Where'd Esmerelda go?"

Mandy stopped in her tracks, flipped one humbled bang-flick, and gave respect where respect was due. "Damn girl, that's some smart shit. You're one a them stuck-up-class girls, huh?"

Esmerelda answered that one as she popped up out of nowhere with an old wooden sword. "Yup, she's in the nerd class."

"Okay, first of all," Ruby clarified, "It's called Chess Club. And second of all, where did you find that thing Esmerelda?!"

"It was in a mop closet back there," she nonchalantly answered.

Ruby could ask but one question. "Are there more?"

Esmerelda smirked. "Nope, but I found you this old baseball bat."

Mandy chuckled as the crazy bathroom buddies exacerbated her impulsiveness. "*Aww man*, now I wanna baseball bat…"

"Trade?" Ruby suggested.

Thankfully, Mandy wasn't that impulsive. "*Yeah*-no. Giving a little a kid a knife would definitely get my big ass back in Juvenile Hall until I'm 18." She bang-flipped and snipped at Ruby, "And stop talking so much, you're gonna let that psycho know we're coming… Where's Esmerelda?"



Chris carefully and quietly slid the sleek black rifle from the case.

The powerful weapon contrast with the dim and dusty light coming through the small ventilation window.

Chris ripped the screen from the window with his bare hand, then he turned to the gun… For this was his gun, and there were many like it, but this one was his… He breathed deep as he swiftly locked the full clip of bullets into place and loaded the chamber with a cold 'clunk'. Chris' hands steadied as he whispered to the weapon, "This is my gun, there are many like it, but this one is mine; its barrel my focus, its bullets my sins, and its trigger my will."

The weapon cared not for the will of this man, because it is only a tool meant to reflect that will.

Chris carefully adjusted the scope as he propped the barrel up in the window. "This is my gun, there are many like it, but—"

"Excuse me?"

Chris pointed the barrel at the little girl as she pointed a wooden sword at him. He honestly thought he might've been hallucinating by that point. "Are…are you real?"

Esmerelda snort-giggled once. "Last time I checked, and can you please not point a gun at me?"

Concentration currently crushed by surreal, Chris calmly lowered the rifle as the girl lowered her sword. His head rang

with the familiarity of PTSD induced anxiety.

"*Thank you*," she sighed in relief. "Guns are super scary."

"You…you look like… You're not real," he coldly stated as he propped the barrel back in the little window.

"Yes I am," she angrily squeaked.

"No," Chris coldly chirped, refusing to entertain the notion of conversing with yet another figment of his imagination.

Esmerelda's face turned adorably red. "Yes," she harshly refuted.

"This is my gun, there are many like it—"

"Oh-shut up!"

"But this one is mine; its barrel my focus—" His murderous mantra halted and his eyes popped open with the stinging 'clomp' that echoed through the top of his head. For some reason his anxiety cooled as he lowered the weapon and looked back at the adorably enraged figment of his imagination. Chris glanced up and around in search of another reason as to why, but he was forced to ask her the question he knew he must. "Did you just hit me on the head with a wooden sword?"

Upon having been asked that, Esmerelda gulped with the realization that she'd hit a man with a gun. "Yes, yes I did, but please don't shoot me…"

Chris unexpectedly demanded, "Prove it. Hit me again."

Esmerelda was starting to think, just maybe, that sneaking off alone to face a crazed, gun-toting assailant was *not* one of her best life choices. "*Um…um*, okay-fine, but you gotta promise not to shoot me with a

gun if I do."

Not a hint of dishonesty existed in Chris' tone. "I give you my word, as a veteran and a man, I will never harm you."

Esmerelda took a deep breath and a few seconds of thought. "Okay," she chipperly said as she swung the sword back and clumsily dropped it atop his head!

Chris' nostrils flared and his right eye twitched. "Ow… You're real."

"RHAAAAA!" Mandy roared as she exploded through a pile of nearby boxes and chokehold Chris with a baseball bat!

Ruby ran up to the rifle, pushing her foot upon it and pinning it to the wall! She grabbed the rifleman's cheeks and raised a knife above her head.

"WAIT!" Esmerelda screeched into the scary situation.

Everyone paused in their ominous positions.

"Don't hurt him! He doesn't know we're real!"

Said pausing continued for a confused, and shaky moment.

Esmerelda broke Ruby's fall as Chris suddenly shoved them all away! He began frantically shifting his aim between each of them, reverting to an intolerant adult. "You all need to leave and let me do my job! Now!"

Mandy impulsively blurted, "Shooting kids is a shit job bro!"

A jarring twinge pricked at the back of Chris' head as he barked at himself, "Exterminate the marks with extreme prejudice——"

Ruby shoved Esmerelda a little. "He's crazy! Why did you help a crazy person?!"

"Avoid collateral deaths with emphasis"—Chris curiously cricked his neck as he lowered the weapon and took a good look at them—"But none of you are bald…"

Ruby exhaustedly motioned at Chris and growled at Ruby, "*See*, crazy."

Chris' bootcamp-keen ears caught the rumbling of an old vehicle through the window and whipped the barrel back up into it. He peered through the scope at the amber'ish colored Cadillac filled with the marks he was looking for.

Mandy worrisomely woe, "He's gonna start killin people you twerps-whatta we do?! You shoulda let us stab him, *Esmerelda*!"

Sick of people bitching her out, Esmerelda squawked, "Just stab him now-he's not even looking at us!"

As the soldier fixed his sights and patiently waited for his targets to emerge, he solemnly stated, "Strike me down if you will, my aim will not falter."

Ruby anxiously jabbered, "*Ooh*, I can't do it-I'm too scared. One of you do it." Not to her surprise, there were no takers for stabbing a stranger.

Chris finished his macabre mantra, "Avoid capture at all costs…"

Esmerelda fearfully squeaked, "Why're you doing this?!"

For Chris, that had been the right question to ask or perhaps just the right person asking it. "Because it's the only way for me to matter…"

"Dude!" Mandy croaked. "Get a hobby!"

Ruby angrily tossed the knife on the floor and stomped over to a different one of the little ventilation windows. "It's

Barter!" She squawked as she saw him hop out of the car below with a pep in his step.

Esmerelda and Mandy shared a swift glance of disbelief.

Mandy gripped the bat tight and said, "That's it, I'm taking care of this shit now."

Chris rested his finger firmly upon the trigger as the last one of them got out. His head jerked away as the scope right in front of his eye smashed beneath a bat! He instantly forced the gothic girl against the wall with the gun! "Why did you do that!?"

Mandy fearfully dropped the bat and honestly chattered, "Because you're a crazy person willing to hurt people-just because someone said so."

Esmerelda boldly preached, "He's only a kid, like me, like us."

Chris knew he'd hesitated to shoot the young woman, but he refused to miss his marks. "I don't need a scope to get the job done." He swung back over to the window ready for a massacre. Chris Pariah's purposeful grip fell flaccid before the unified joy in all of their steps.

Barter happily hurried them all ahead; laughter on their faces as they stood as strong as any army.

A dazed Chris watched as the gentle hand of Esmerelda lifted the barrel from the window and sat it down on the floor.

"Please," Esmerelda pleaded, "People only hurt people cause they're scared."

"Scared?" Chris repeated as he slumped back into some boxes.

Esmerelda talked on in spite of her fear. "Yeah, scared. Just like we are of you."

Chris really looked upon their worried faces for the first time. He simply let the weapon fall to the floor as he huffed and heaved his pain. "The Colonel lied to me…"

Ruby said, "I have no idea who that is, but if he told you to do this-than heck yes he did."

Chris felt ill to his stomach as he realized the mindless monster he'd become. "I-uh, I, I need for you kids to call the police on me… It's the only way I can help anyone…"

Mandy guiltily cleared her throat. "Actually, I kinda already told some of my friends to go do that…"

Esmerelda stepped past her everything and gently held the man's trembling hand. "It'll be okay. We're here to help you."

Chris knew not why or how he would've ever deserved such kindness, but he was glad she thought he did.

Ruby asked, "Does anyone else hear the Principal's voice right now?"

DAY 14
Accumulated Campaign
-Mixing Martyrs-

Diana Folknor strut away from her car with a preemptive sense of fulfillment, flats clapping against the concrete with noticeable echoes. This was the first major network outside of Coriander she'd headed for, because the owner was known for letting his reporters air the real news. The hairs upon the back of her neck suddenly stood on end. Having had to rely on her instincts more than once, Diana knew something bad was on its way. She stopped for but a second.

The clunking of unseen footsteps ominously ended moments after hers.

"Shit," Diana quietly cursed before abruptly sprinting off back towards her car. She stabbed her keys at the door of her Benz, scratches on it no longer a concern, and leapt into the seat as she locked all the doors. Her hand froze against the key in the ignition as she looked up to the sight of multiple masked men blocking her car into its space. "*Oh-you have* gotta be kidding me with this murder sitcom shit…"

One of the masked men stepped forward as he pulled a gun, pointing it at the windshield and the Diana behind it. "Get out of the car! NOW!"

Diana raised her hands and nodded. She suddenly wrenched on the keys and revved the car on as she jammed it into reverse with the tires screeching, preemptively ducking beneath the dash!

Bullets dotted the windshield as the back of the Benz blasted the economy car behind it completely out of its own spot!

Car alarms blared as Diana peeked up over the dash.

The masked men ran towards her car that was now thirty feet away.

Diana sped off, decorating the garage with collateral damage and leaving the men scrambling back to their own vehicle somewhere. "*Damn*," she huffed in disbelief. Then she hollered a moment later in excitement, "*Yeah!* Take that shit you sons a bitches! Nobody fucks with Diana fucking Folk—" Her head jerked to the side when she heard an engine roaring and tires screeching.

The masked men wildly weaved around the adjacent lane in a stolen SUV, unable to find an opening between the parked cars.

R-Stank yanked off his mask and harped from the back seat, "Dumb fuckers! What're you doing?! Ya'll said this was a muggin! Not a fuckin car chase!"

The driver poignantly stuck a gun in R-Stank's face and snarled, "Shut the fuck up and do what ya been paid for, or I'll skull fuck ya with this gun and we'll split yer cut…"

R-Stank sneered his platinum teeth at all of them for a moment; to ensure they knew he wasn't a pushover. He whipped his mask back on and growled, "Let's do this shit then pussies…"

Diana's eyes bugged-out at the impending exit they were both racing for, and its ominous upward slope. Her foot steadily pushed the gas down as she fearfully hummed, "This thing had better do

more than make people think I'm important."

The two vehicles' engines engulfed the garage in their mechanized roars.

A wide-eyed old lady in a mint bug waited at the intersection ahead, watching the car chase in disbelief.

Diana screamed in excited-fear, gas pedal pressed to the floor. She shot past the stop sign and swerved inward towards the exit as the SUV did the same.

Metal screeched and fiberglass fractured as the two vehicles' sides slapped against one another! Sparks spit from the quicker Benz's bumper as it skittered ahead of the hefty man-filled SUV with a few failing tire-squeals!

Diana shot past a shocked employee's ticket booth, glancing back down the slope and seeing no sign of her pursuers. She smirked and concisely said, "Diana, fuckin, Folknor-EEK!" Diana not so concisely screamed as she realized she was about to hit the top of a slope at 60 mph.

The foot-traffic above stilled as howling brakes echoed up from the tunnel. But the Benz catching air moments later sent everyone running in all directions.

Diana's car struck the road and drifted to a stop with the rest of the halting traffic around her! A personal cloud of car debris post-sprinkled over Diana's car. She slowly raised her head from the seat, burgundy curls a disheveled bush. Diana looked around at the complete lack of dead or hurt people and smiled, giving herself but a quick and assuring, "Diana-fuckin-Folknor…" She waved to the shocked bus of students and teachers just to her side.

Victory was short lived for the brave

woman as an SUV soared out of the garage and blasted the Benz's passenger side! The larger vehicle shoved the smaller one into the side of the bus with a wave of everyone's screams from inside!

A now bloody and disheveled Diana once again slowly raised her head from the seat. She fiddled with the driver and passenger side door handles before realizing they were both pinned between steel.

The SUV's radiator hissed at her through the broken window.

Diana was suddenly glad she'd paid extra for the moon roof as she jammed at the button and it half-opened. With a few grunts and a little upper-body girth, she pried it the rest of the way open and climbed out. Standing upon the roof of her vehicle, she panned the destruction in disbelief; as though her life had been thrown into one of those action movies with more explosions than plot. Diana's head fell in exacerbation as the masked gunmen cut off her only exits; two on one side and three on the other.

It seemed the ex-reporter had no need to deliver the news when she was making it right out front, camera men cramming against windows while they adjusted their zooms as others raced down stairs and elevators.

Their vicious ringleader hollered from the group of three, "You know what we want bitch! Just give us the damn video or we'll get it off yer corpse!"

His masked buddy whispered, "We're not supposed to say anything about——"

"I DON'T GIVE A FUCK!" He furiously interjected.

All eyes turned to the car-crashed Diana chuckling and chortling away. Still in

good humor, she shouted, "All this for a video of Barter and his family!? What is wrong with you morons!?"

"Bitch! I said give me the—"

"Yeah-yeah," Diana nonchalantly interrupted, "I heard ya the first time. You want it"—she pulled the cracked phone from her pocket and pumped the volume all the way up as she held it above her head—"Here it is."

The video played on, "Hi. I'm Barter and this is his family; his mom Daria, his dad Dusky, his sister Windy—"

R-Stank's entire demeanor shifted as he heard her name. For the first time since he could recall, he made a choice for himself rather than against himself. Being in the group of two gave him optimal room for betrayal, stepping back as he pulled off his mask.

The ringleader roared at Diana, "GIVE ME THE PHONE OR I'LL SHOOT YER ASS!"

The video rang on as Diana stood her ground, while ambient police sirens began cutting through the streets.

"THAT'S IT! YER DEAD BITCH!

R-Stank spun the pistol around and whacked it across the back of his cohorts head with a meaty 'thud'!

Diana glanced towards the sudden sight of R-Stank switching sides and then back at the gun about to spit speeding bullets that she was *not* faster than. There was no way Diana considered herself a damsel in distress, but right then she really need a knight; thankfully, there was a Jimmy.

"JIMMY!"

The ringleader barely turned before a husky man in a Superman shirt, yelling his

own name, barreled through the lot of them like bowling pins!

One shot rang out with a 'pow' and a 'ping' as the wayward bullet harmlessly ricochet off the top of the bus!

The ringleader awkwardly stumbled to his feet and searched for his firearm, soon realizing that one of his criminal cohorts was on his face unconscious and the other coward halfway down the road already.

R-Stank glanced back as police lights rounded a distant intersection. "Hey!" He yelled up at the head-spinning Diana to get her attention. "I'm sorry!" R-Stank threw the gun underhanded to her and took off like a bat outta Hell.

Diana 'eeked' as she fumbled the weapon around her palms before grasping it the very wrong way.

His head still spinning from the plus-sized tackle, the ringleader seethed at the woman holding a gun. The malicious man's eyes caught sight of his weapon, camouflaged by the car tire it was hugging.

Diana locked eyes with her stand-alone pursuer and aimed the gun at him. She gave the barrel pointed at her own face a wide-eyed stare before fumbling it about again; until she dropped it down into the cars broken window. "Shit…"

The ringleader ripped his weapon out from under the vehicle, tossed it up at the unarmed Diana, and roared, "I'M KILLIN YOU FER FUN!" His eyes skewed in pain, his gun-toting hand popped open, and the device of death dropped to the asphalt as a meaty hand wrapped around his wrist. The ringleader gave the short brown-haired man's mentally misfortunate gaze a confused grimace.

Jimmy struck his free thumb to his chest and courageously crowed, "Jimmyman."

He realized that the copyright infringing S on the husky man's shirt had been painted over with a big J. Before the ringleader could reach the knife in his pocket, he was off his feet and being slammed flat into the street!

Jimmyman propped one of his colorful-sandaled feet atop the beaten ringleader and his hands upon his hips. He shot a big O' benevolent grin up at the befuddled Diana.

She slowly hopped off of the crashed car with a few angry aches.

"JIMMY!" An older woman wildly screeched as she stomped out from around the bus.

Jimmyman lost a little composure as he ended his hero pose and faced his furious mother. "It's okay *mom*! I-I'm Jimmyman now—"

"Is this because of that boy on the news again!? Are you in trouble with the police!?" His much less hardy mother irrationally harped away.

"No *mom*, I—"

The overbearing parent gave her adult ward not a breath of an opinion. "No! You are in HUGE trouble!"

This time, a bruised and battered Diana was the knight another needed. "No he isn't, I was."

The mother hadn't even realized the bloodied woman was there. "What?!" She squawked in offense and confusion.

Diana retort with a much more skilled squawk, "The man you're yelling at like a child just saved my damn life! He just came out here like a real-life damn hero and done tore armed criminals down like—well, a damn

hero!"

Jimmy dropped a harsh, "*See mom, I told you so*," at his baffled mother.

Diana finally took a moment to put a thankful palm on Jimmy's hefty shoulder. "Thank you more than I could ever thank you darlin."

Jimmy beamed even bigger as he confidently inquired, "Would you like to go on a date with Jimmyman, please?"

Diana couldn't help her blushing cheeks. "Hon, I don't see how a smart woman like myself could say no ta the man that just saved her life…hold on, how old are you?"

"Jimmyman is 28, but I shaved my beard-because I only grew it to try and not look retarded."

"Jimmy!?" His mother quacked.

The appreciative son said, "Sorry mom, but I don't wanna lie about who I am. And I am retarded, but that doesn't mean who I can be as a person is retarded."

Jimmyman's mother quietly huffed, "I just want you to be happy…"

"Me too mom, but I have to do that for myself."

Diana cleared her throat, never imagining for a second in her life she'd of found a man like him appealing. Then she cringed as her side sang a painful song to her. "Don't mean to interrupt ya'll, but would one of you mind getting a gal an ambulance?"

"Jimmyman will help," Jimmy stoutly said. He lifted Diana into his arms, like she were a pillow, and walked into the flurry of red and blue lights.

"Jimmy?!" His mother futilely harped

out of habit.

Nestled into the amazingly strong and yet teddy-bear-soft man's arms, Diana felt that things could've gone worse. After all, it'd be easy to get the video out there now; what with the urban disaster she'd been at the heart of. And being carried away by a real world hero wasn't so bad either. She whispered the tag-line drifting about her head to herself in humor, "All because of a boy named Barter…"



Between their laughter and the cheek-reddening buzzes they had, the Principal, the receptionist, and the pizza man didn't notice the Davidson family in the doorway.

"*Busted*," Windy had to say, especially after so many years of being on the receiving end of those words.

Ted awkwardly shoved the bottle of rum in the desk with his plastic cup as Mira downed hers to dispose of the evidence, and Luigi just laughed.

Barter ignored everyone and stole a slice of the half-missing pizza.

The Principal fumblingly deflected, "Barter-you're late and capes are not allowed in school."

"Ee nuffs," Barter replied with a full mouth.

Super Daria destroyed the situation with nonchalant. "Oh-nobody cares about yer little drinky-time, we're here for something much more important."

"What?" Mira asked to everyone's surprise.

Daria squinted over at Opol, who was

supposed to take the lead from there, but was too busy staring at pizza. "Uh-em?!"

Opol knew an intentional throat-clear when he heard one. "Ah-yes, forgive me, as an—the chi resonating from this pizza is quite lively."

The only kinda pizza Luigi had ever known to resonate was the one his brother accidentally left out for three days. "It's organic."

"May I have some please?"

Luigi waved the monk in a cowboy hat on. "Sure, go ahead."

"Thank you." Opol carefully lifted one of the slices to his nose.

Dusky tapped the monk on the shoulder and whispered, "I'd get back to the point before Daria's face explodes if I were you."

Opol decided it best to wait on the delicacy and used his mouth for a greater purposes. "My sincerest apologies, Principal Procrustean. You see, we are here to ask for your help, because as an ambassador I can deem anyone I see fit as an expert advocate. And this amazing family has decided you would make a good advocate for the kind of education Barter has shown is possible."

Barter gave a pizza-peppered smile and a confident nod, while Opol sunk his teeth into the best and only pizza slice he'd ever eaten with an appreciative groan.

The Principal and his siesta pals were flabbergasted.

Daring Dusky further explained for the hungry monk. "We have decided to take a peacefully proactive shove for change, for better leaders with shallower pockets, and for better education of the people that will be here when we're gone."

Goth Windy attacked the pessimism brewing upon the Principal's face before it could sour his hope. "You know I'm a serious pain in the butt—"

Ted nodded, unable to deny it.

"So you also know I wouldn't stand beside every word this family says if it wasn't something real, and important."

Brave Barter swallowed his bite and spoke his bit. "We need you, Principal Procrustean. Barter needs you in his family to help everyone in Coriander and beyond. Will you join us?"

Mira and Luigi were on the edges of their seats with anticipation, almost shamefully so.

The Principal's pessimism shifted from the work-conditioned kind to the personally-conditioned kind. "I'm sorry"—he gave himself a self-defecating scoff—"I'm not the kind of man you want as an educational advocate. Heck, I think religion should be allowed in schools…" Ted's eyes went wide as that last part accidentally slipped off his alcohol-slicked tongue.

Mira hopped into the fray with a quirky, "Why?!"

Ted was not happy to be continuing this line of discussion.

Barter queried, "Isn't it already here?"

That got Ted's goat good. "No, not at all. And walking around with a cross around your neck is not religious, it's a fashion accessory. I mean, to tell another person that their belief isn't allowed is a form of subjugation, subjugation by a place that's supposed to educate and understand; which really means the only thing we're teaching

children is to hide what they believe and believe what the school tells them is *proper* instead"—he chuckle the next words to himself—"If I Were the Devil…"

Opol clarified the confusion attempting to occur. "If I Were the Devil was indeed a wise and well-spoken radio segment, and Paul Harvey an insightful man whose words carry frightening relevance to this day."

"Sorry ya'll," Mira interjected, "Not ta interrupt, but you folks should know that not even an hour ago some suits from the board of education came on down and tried to put an end to—well, all this ya'll are trying to do. But don't worry, our good Principal Ted here set em straight"—she leaned in at Barter and whispered—"Also, I'm a huge fan of ya'lls thing ya got goin."

"Thank you," Barter gleefully chirped in reply.

Mira beamed back at him.

Goth Windy took a chance on the old Principal and gave him her faith. "This is exactly why we need you, Ted. We need you because of what you believe. What she just said is proof of it, and why I'm choosing to believe in you."

Theodore was honestly glad he'd had a drink or two, it made the weight of the world a little less daunting. He slapped a palm against the back of his head as he huffed out his ego. "Crap, sorry. Listen, all that sounds wonderful and yes I-I very much do support a better school, but… I think I know a woman who'd make a better advocate than me, and she'd even uphold the same stance on belief in schools…"

Mira hummed, "Is it me?"

Ted's brow wrinkled in annoyance even

though his words were polite. "Sorry, no. It's—"

A familiar duo of gothic gals banged on one of the big windows to the office and passive-aggressively hollered about a guy with a gun.

Luigi stated the obvious. "Well that can't be good."



Police sirens blared to an end as the front of the school hued with flashing red and blue lights. Officers poured out of their cars and poised with pistols in hand.

A dark swat van skid to a halt and a team of automatic weapon armed men began a swift march towards the doors.

As with most situations involving schools and guns, all Hell had broken loose.

Knowing school shootings all too well, the swat leader made his hand gestures to the others to ensure they knew it was go-time. He held his hand out and clenched it into a tight fist, inciting their heavily-armed charge!

"WAIT!" Barter screamed at the group of men pointing guns in his direction.

"STAND DOWN!" The swat leader ordered as he and his men lowered their weapons.

Barter urgently spouted on. "He's not gonna hurt anybody! He just—"

Like most headstrong adults before loud kids, the leader tried to drag Barter off without listening to a word he was saying.

However, like the headstronger kid Barter was, he punched right where it hurt, because the swat didn't have bullet proof vests for crotches. "YOU WILL LISTEN TO

BARTER RIGHT NOW!"

Tactful or not, the boy had gotten everyone's attention.

Barter cleared his throat and straightened his outfit. "Good, now listen closely. The person with the gun wants to give himself up without hurting anyone, but he'll only do it in front of TV news-people cameras so he can tell you why he made this mistake."

Flabbergasted had become the word of the day amongst the faces of those the gallant grade-schooler collided with. How had an 8 year old in a cape even managed to do this with a team of adults around him you ask? Well, that short tale goes like this…



"Don't call the cops!" Barter harped at the Principal with a 9 and a 1 dialed, waiting on that last 1.

They all looked at Barter like he were mad.

Ted huffed, "Young man, out of all the things that could get me fired today, not calling the cops when there's a man with a gun in the school is right at the top." He dialed that 1.

The certainty in the brave boys face and tone was that of an adult leader. "But Barter can fix this without anyone getting hurt."

"911, what's your emergency?"

Ted froze for a second.

"Hello?"

Ted ended the call against every pound of his better judgment; as all better judgment had given him was the flaccid life

he secretly yearned to break free from. "Then go do it already, because when they call back I have to tell them." Ted grabbed the microphone for the morning announcements and turned it on with a school-wide 'screek'. "This is Principal Procrustean and this is a schoolwide emergency. All students are to remain in class with the doors locked. I repeat, do not leave your classes until further notice."

As the announcement rang throughout the school, Barter zipped out of the office with an unhappy assortment of allies.

"Hold on!" Daria shouted at her son. "You can't run off to face a crazy person with a gun!"

Barter smiled. "Yes he can."

Opol went with his heart and chimed-in before the boy's displeased parents could. "I believe he can as well, but he cannot do this alone. He needs all of our support to be the amazing person he can be."

Even Barter was a little F word-of-the-day by that one.

Thank goodness for Goth Windy as she leapt onto Barter and Opol's bandwagon with a convincing, "We can do this family. We can sidestep all the crap we've been taught about *what's right* and *safety*, and we can make a real difference."

Daria looked at their confident and courageous faces, giving in with a grin. She approvingly shook her head at them. "Well, let's get movin ya psychos."

A beaming Barter took the lead yet again.

The Davidson family dashed down the hallway like the superheroes they were, but skid to stop like anyone would when seeing a

man with a big gun dashing the same. Unfortunately, the fantastical family had little chance to execute their awesomeness as their job had already been done.

"Barter!" Esmerelda squeaked in joy as she dropped the long bag in her arms and wrapped them around him.

Thankfully and miraculously, Mandy had the sense to say, "Don't freak out adult people, the sad looking guy with the gun here is not going to hurt anyone."

Chris gulped and politely nodded at the people he'd almost murdered mere moments ago.

"Yup," Ruby proudly added, "We totally saved ya'lls lives…well, I kinda sorta guess maybe Esmerelda did kinda-sorta maybe a lot of the saving."

Once again the consensus was, flabbergasted.

"*Okay*," Barter hummed, "But why is Esmerelda still hugging Barter?"

Daria held in her laughter, but not the palm-to-the-face snort caused by doing so.

Esmerelda finally let go and giddily replied, "Because I like you."

Barter dawned a speculative grin; his attention halved between her and the rifleman. "Um, no. You call him weird and stupid like—all of the time."

Esmerelda's smiling mouth gasped open, but shut with a huff. She loudly grumbled, "Crap, I did do those things a lot…" The strong-willed young lady raised her chin and proclaimed, "But that's why Esmerelda saved your life from a crazy gunman, no offense Chis-we're good my brotha."

Chris calmly chime-in, "None taken."

Ruby's nostrils flared and her head

sternly shook at the unapproved slang.

Esmerelda preached on, because she'd always been good at being loud. "And that's why I'm sorry and wanna be Barter's 1st girlfriend; also, she really likes your cape." She held back her deer-in-the-headlights look as much as humanly possible.

He wouldn't understand why for a couple of years, but the way she'd spoken had put butterflies in his tummy.

Even the gun toting murderer grinned and nodded at the young man in loves path.

Barter cleared his throat, but still replied with a vigorously adorable voice-crack, "Y-yeah, sure-okay that sounds okay…"

Awesome Opol was currently on the side of urgency as he interjected on the adorable moment. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the flashing police lights coming from down that way beckon our utmost attentions."

Dusky and Windy groaned together, "I hate cops."

"Jinx," Daria said first. "He makes a really good point though. So, what's the plan, guy with the gun?"

With a humbled head, Chris replied, "I just want to admit my truth and be punished for what I've done…"

Daria grumbled, "We're gonna need a bit more direction than that."

"Barter has a plan." His witty smirk turned into a wide-eyed one as Esmerelda planted a puckering kiss on his cheek.



"Good!" Barter stated aloud as he realized the entire mob of armed officers

were struck with silent confusion. "Now you all listen to what I say! I'm gonna go get Chris and he's gonna walk out to me and give up his gun—Chris is the guy with the gun…that's gonna walk out with Barter. But only *after* you let the media-TV-news people talk to him."

The closest non-rookie swat gal grumbled at the swat leader, "What do we do now, sir?"

He locked eyes with a kid in a cape and calmly replied, "We follow negotiation protocol, because apparently it's already been done…"

The uncomfortable swat gal understandably inquired, "Um, our orders sir?"

Their leader quickly gathered his wits. "Make a safe line for the media to approach, use any available officers and keep half the team on ready." As his men and woman, executed his orders, he sat his rifle down with the safety on and approached the boy with his hands out in peace. "We're doing as you asked, but I need to know if you're in any danger right now."

Cape to the wind, he said, "Don't worry, Barter's got this under control."

The swat leader suddenly realized where he'd seen this child. "You're that kid who was talking to the mayor on TV."

"Yes sir"—he stuck out his hand to shake—"I'm Barter."

He gave the boys hand one stern shake. "Edgar." In all honesty, title of Captain and status of military veteran be damned, he had no idea how to deal with this grade schooler.

The chatter of press grew behind the

odd couple planted in the center of the situation.

Barter smiled and waved at the many chattering reporters. "Okay, Barter's gonna do the thing now. So please don't shoot anybody, okay?"

"I'll do my best," swat Captain Edgar honestly replied.

That was good enough for Barter. He zipped back inside the school and around the first corner where they all waited.

Daria breathed like she'd been holding her breath the whole time, wrapping her palms around her son's cheeks and jabbering away. "Oh-my-god-you're still alive and-I'm—like the worst parent ever for letting my only son face a firing squad-and—"

"Mom!" Barter helpfully interjected. "You're the best mom ever, and Barter's totally fine and not shot at all."

The others waited in anticipation, but Windy hated waiting. "Well?! Did it work?"

Barter nodded and sent sighs of relief over them all.

Chris heavily held his purpose together. "Well, I suppose this is it… I just want to thank all of you for understanding…" He kneeled before Esmerelda and bowed his head to her. "Especially you. I may never know why, but I will always be thankful for you coming to my rescue.

Esmerelda pushed the gun away a little and wrapped her arms around him for a few seconds. "Go on Chris, be a good guy now."

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he saluted her and took Barter's already held out hand.

This time, Barter made sure to look at his mom and say, "Barter will be right back;

it'll be okay mom."

Esmerelda gushed, "My boyfriend's so awesome-considerate."

Dusky sighed and shook his head. "Okay, that's just too damn cute to handle."

Barter took a deep, leg-steadying breath to belay the blue.

As if on cue, Opol queried before Barter's departure, "Green tea mochi anyone?"

Barter dug into the bag Opol held out and stuck a fistful of the powder sugar covered, squishy gummy goodness into his mouth. He motioned for Chris to take one as well.

With submissive shrugs, everyone's gums slapped as they sucked down the delicious homemade delicacies together. It was an odd moment none the less, but it was a good one; especially for a broken soldier with few good moments left in his life.

Mandy whispered at Ruby, "Dude, how weird is our lives right now?"

"So weird—but good weird," she answered between bites.

"Yum! Mochi really cure Barter's blues." Barter whipped around to get the maximum cape effect as he pulled Chris along for the ride and Daria held her breath again.

Esmerelda continued to swoon while chewing.

Windy asked the smitten lil gal, "What's in the bag?"

Esmerelda lifted the long bag up in front of her and jangled in up and down like she really shouldn't have, and the looks on Ruby and Mandy's faces insisted that. "Whoops…"

Barter stepped outside with Chris and a volley of clicks followed the media chatter as the readied swat took their weapons' safety off.

The held-back swarm of reporters spouted about Barter and his abusive family, while others shouted about guns in schools.

Barter yelled, "SHUT UP!"

The hollering heaved to a humming hubbub.

Barter continued on nice and loud. "If you wanna talk to Barter, you can do that later at City Hall! But right now this man has something to say; I suggest you listen." He stepped behind Chris and let him speak his truth.

The lost man looked into the cameras as though they were a jury of his peers, as if the only mission he'd left to do was this. "My name is Private Chris Pariah and I was ordered to kill an innocent family by a man named Colonel Biff Baden. I am guilty of many crimes of which I fully admit and demand the greatest punishment for. Today I drop my weapon forever so someone else can stop this monster disguised as a Colonel." Chris calmly dropped his weapon to the ground and held his hands out for cuffing.

Captain Edgar gladly, and swiftly obliged. He quietly said to the man only, "As a veteran, I thank you for peacefully giving up."

Hands on his hips, Barter huffed with pleased relief. Brave Barter's grand expression skipped right into too surprised when he felt a drive-by kiss on his cheek. "Esmerelda?!"

"Sorry, I forgot the bullets." Esmerelda once again precariously jangled

the bag. She skipped right over to Edgar, tugged on his pants, and held the bag of bullets up to the baffled swat captain. "Here's all the bullets for the gun."

Edgar took the bag and said, "Thank you?" It was really shaping up to be an odd day for him.

"You're welcome. Bye Chris."

Chris returned her smiling wave with his cuffed one. "Goodbye, Esmerelda."

Meanwhile, frozen in shock with a half-tilted Mimosa dribbling into her lap, was Esmerelda's ember-haired mother. Already annoyed with the breaking news interrupting her soap opera, the last thing she'd expected to see was her daughter giving a swat guy a bag of bullets. And the second to last thing she'd expected was her frozen beverage finally making it through her ill-fitted, cotton-free outfit. "Eek!"

DAY 14
Accumulated Campaign
-City Hall Super Slam-

Luigi nervously cleared his throat yet again as he glanced over at Ms. Yano in the passenger seat; his old truck still covered in gray primer. He wasn't sure how he got so lucky as to be the one escorting the lovely teacher, but he wasn't about to look a gift goat in the mouth. "I—"

"I've never been an Educational advocate before," Ms. Yano nervously prattled. "I hope I do okay…"

The pizza maker didn't skip a passionate beat. "I think there's nothing a woman of your beauty and intelligence can't do amazingly."

She gasped in disbelief. "Mr. Luigi…"

"Oh, uh, sorry. I just meant that I think you'll do fine."

In the entirety of her life, Ms. Yano had never met a man that could both raise her heartbeat with a compliment and then humble that heart with a helpful apology. And just like that, she realized she'd never met a man like him! The truth exploded from her mouth with reckless and blatant abandon. "I'm a Buddhist who took a vow of celibacy when I was 16…"

"I see…" he seriously hummed as he thought for a second. Luigi laughed as he said, "So that might put a damper on me trying to make you my girlfriend, huh."

His lighthearted reply had only

convinced her all the more, but first she had to snip at him, "Keep your eyes on the road, Mr. Luigi."

The tires ever-so-slightly 'skirt' as he said, "Yes ma'am. My apologies."

"It's fine-so listen, I took that vow of celibacy because I believe in soul-mates and wanted to wait for him… But my point is that, if you'll be patient with me, I'd like to go on some dates with you and get to know you better, because I think there's a chance you could be my-uh…eh-um, you know, soul thingy…" Ms. Yano internally scolded herself for not having ended on a stronger lingual note than 'soul thingy'.

"Wow…"

"Please watch the road—"

"Right-right, sorry. I mean…wow… I can't say anyone's ever said that to me before." Luigi gave a humbled chuckle. "I guess, well, I'd love to take you on as many dates as you want. Oh, is cellbecity the one about not having sex?"

She giggled at his terrible pronunciation. "Celibacy, and yes it is."

"Oh-okay, thank you. Just needed some clarification on that one. So, do you like movies?"

Ms. Yano gladly continued her gushing over the unexpected delivery of a potential pizza guy for her soul. "Yes, I love movies."

"How about Italian food?"

"Oh yeah, anything pasta and covered in sauce is good with me."

He chuckled. "Well that's all I needed to know; you're perfect."

She blushed away at that one. "No, I'm-watch the road."

"Ah-oops."

"I'm pretty sure those lines are there to stay between rather than over."

Luigi laughed. "And you're sassy *too*; I already said you're perfect, so stop getting better."

Her blushing faced pursed-up at him in playful jest. "…Watch the road."



Having called shotgun, Windy was the first to ask, "Why're they driving like that?"

Dusky's first thought was, "Maybe he's a little drunk, ha."

Barter 'ha' along with his dad.

Daria kept her eyes on the road as she snapped, "Hey, drunk driving is not funny young man." She whipped a glance of judgement back at Dusky. "And you, try harder to dad please."

Dusky sighed and humbly nodded in agreement, as it was far from the worst tongue lashing she'd given him.

Barter gave Opol a strange look as the monk slowly squeaked his fingers across the economy cars interior, then sniffed it long and thoroughly.

Opol curiously hummed to himself, "This car smells like oregano…"

Barter began sniffing at the seat in front of him.

Dusky was beginning to worry the two of them had found his medicinal cookies, but then he realized they were still in his pocket and decided to sniff the seat to.

A wide-eyed Windy warbled, "Wh-What're you weirdos doing?!"

Daria dropped a mom-threat. "Everyone better behave or I will turn this car around."



Anderson worrisomely tussled with his glasses as though they'd miraculously let him see through the tinted back window of the car they were following. "Are you sure you saw them get into those cars?"

Izzy's annoyed expression shown well beneath his heavy facial hair. "For the last damn time, I know what it looks like when someone sneaks away from a media frenzy like the one back at that school."

"Yes, that is fine, but——"

"No."

"What if——"

"It's them."

"How do you——"

"Because they were all dressed like comic book characters and cowboys."

Anderson cleared his throat. "Yes-well, that does seem a valid reason to believe it's them…but——"

"No!"



Click after tedious click, her hazel eyes scanned through potential male prospects on tax-payer time. Gabby figured any good tax-payer would gladly pay for the sake of finding love. Her recently unbraided black hair slumped to the desk as she realized she'd already seen the same guy she

was looking at, meaning he was either a website droid or a weirdo on the hunt. "Well, least that explains why he's attractive."

The fax machine buzzed with urgency as her computer screen dinged with the same.

Gabriella rarely received investigation forwarding requests on both at the exact same time; it stank of uncertainty. She closed the website and clicked the big blinking request first.

Forwarded straight from FBI minor investigations was a confusingly phrased and thoroughly written confirmation with a familiar last name attached to it.

"Daria Davidson—really now." She scoffed at its entirety. "Let's see… Persons of interest…yada-yada… *Yeah*, that's some rich asshole fueled bullshit if I ever read any"—a smirk rolled her lips as she continued reading—"And it looks like your confirmation address is the same as the Coriander City Zoo…" Gabby took a good few minutes to really think about who she wanted to be; just like a good friend had recently taught her. "Yup-sounds good ta me, request accepted, because I don't appreciate politicians bullyin single mothers or my friends." She shot the insistent fax machine a glare as yet another one came through.

The station doors hulked open as a small swarm of officers carried a familiar bulky biker in by both arms.

Spider turned a big semi-toothed smile to Gabby and happily hollered, "It's a pleasure to see you again!" He laughed at the officers as he jested, "Which way to the sauna boys!? I'm feelin a little roughed up! HA!"

One of the deputies slapped down a stack of charges and huffed, "Any chance you can help me out with this?"

Gabby grimaced. "Maybe, but what the heck happened out there?"

The flustered rookie tussled his blond hair as he gave the abridged version of the story. "I aint never seen anything like it, the damn guy was like a bull trying to rodeo the cowboys. Flinging beers and laughing like a darn madman; it's a damn miracle aint no one got hurt."

Gabby looked at the messily written tickets and notepads. "Wow, yeah-that'd do it." She let her tongue slip, "I love yer accent."

"My what?"

The big dumb blond standing in front of Gabriella was just the cannoli filling Daria had suggested she go find. "I'll tell you what hon, I think I can take care of this paperwork for ya. *But*, it might take a while and I might get hungry before that and you might wanna take me to dinner."

The rookie cleared his throat and straightened his posture. "Oh, uh, isn't that against them employee rules or something?"

Gabby shrugged. "Yeah-but who cares, I hate this job anyways, but I don't hate you…"

"Oh, um, well-then. I'd uh, It'd be my pleasure ta take such a pretty gal to dinner."

"Well aren't you just delicious. I'm off at 5."

"Me too," the rookie chirped, machismo swiftly switching his demeanor to smooth or at least some variation of smooth. "I mean,

I'll see you then, beautiful."

Gabby gave a giddy wave as the rookie fumbled off in smiling disbelief. She zipped over to the fax, glanced at the exact same faxes as the digital request, and shook her head in shame of those supposedly above her. Gabby gave a purposeful stretch and dropped the papers into the trash. "Whoops. Oh well, guess that's how I lost that when they come askin."

Trouble was far from done with the receptionist as a 911 emergency blinked on her computer's screen.

She leapt to it as fast as she could, just like she did for every 911 request. Gabby had to re-grumble what she'd read. "Potential gunmen on school property." She forwarded the request to all on duty officers and leapt out of her seat to go tell the other boys personally.



The Davidson family's mini caravan pulled up to the media parade in front of City Hall. Not a one of them wasn't ready for this, because not a one of them had any other expectation other than talking about and being about the truth.

Ms. Yano and Luigi on the other hand felt a little foreboding, but not so much flabbergasted.

Having a long-standing fear of overcrowded areas, Luigi gave the best supporting salvo he could think of. "Good luck Ms. Yano. I give you my word I'll be right here waiting for you with the windows up and the radio loud."

She took a deep breath, no stranger to

public speaking and well-practiced after years of doing so with rooms of rambunctious rascals. Ms. Yano opened the door to an instantaneous assault of inquiries. She gulped, whipped her head back to Luigi, and hummed, "Please come with me…"

Luigi gulped himself, but gave a confident nod yes. He flipped the truck off, locked his door, and followed her out the passenger side. Luigi took Ms. Yano's hand, leading her over to Opol and Dusky acting as defensive shields as they pushed back the edges of the media storm.

Barter stood stout between his mother and sister, eyes looking past the petty questions and nepotistic news nuances. With the aid of his allied family, he parted the persistent people with ease.

Even the private security officers spouting stymying rules about unsanctioned use of City Hall couldn't hold the people at bay; for it is the people that any City Hall itself should belong to.

The path of Barter's family was a self-cleared one right on through Coriander City Hall, leaving their pursuers parked unnoticed amongst the media mob.

Isiah creatively cursed, "Fuck a duck. We missed them…"

Anderson looked on the brighter side. "At least it was actually them."

"Don't even start with me man!"

"Fine, geez."

Isiah grumbled to himself, "I swear to god, the one chance I get to do good and I dick it off like everything else…"

Being that communication was not Anderson's best avenue of understanding, he said, "I have OCD, but you have a lack of

confidence; much easier to deal with."

"Probably should've asked this a while ago, but who are you man?"

OCD or not, honesty was easy. "I'm a highly educated, ex-military software engineer who recently realized he doesn't want to be a government tool anymore."

Isiah could but say, "Respect."

"Thank you. So, what are we going to do?"

Isiah looked back into the fully loaded news van and sighed. "I had a good thought, but it's useless unless you know anything about hacking a DSNG satellite."

Anderson pointed to himself and matter-of-factly stated, "Software engineer…"

Isiah took a second longer than he should've to grasp that one. "…Oh shit man, you're a software engineer."

They both looked into the back of the van.

Anderson asked, "So what do you need me to do?"

"I need access to the bandwidth and run a wireless feed to the jumbo monitor inside, because we're gonna give everyone here and the whole damn state a private interview with the Mayor…"

Anderson smirked. "Give me five minutes."

They both leapt to the back, Isiah grabbing up his camera with a new battery and Anderson clicking away at the computerized console in comfort; donut-sticky keys be damned.

"Okay," Isiah huffed as he snagged up some rope and electrical wire with a tool belt. "So. If we're gonna get this out there I have to leave like right now, but I have

this camera already patched in and ready to go."

Anderson's eyes didn't leave the screen. "Then you had better go. Don't worry about me, I got your back from right here."

Adrenaline unhinged Isiah's knees as he leapt out the side of the van! He flung the sliding door shut behind him and took off into the fray of camera commanding crusaders. His one ace in the hole being that he'd been arrested as a teenager for creatively vandalizing City Hall…



Annabelle's pretty face was grumped with an ugly impatience aimed at her phone.

Mark stopped prodding his visage in the mirror and noticed the dourness of hers. "You should fix your face before we go out there. Wouldn't want people thinking my new advisor is an ugly bitch."

Her expression feistily soured. "First of all"—she motioned to all of herself—"I couldn't be ugly even if I tried. And second of all, I can't get ahold of my uncle…it just keeps saying his phone is in airplane mode…"

"Yeah, people do that when they want to be left alone."

Anabelle gave an exacerbated head-shake. "Why are you always such an ass?"

He honestly answered, "Because nice guys finish last, and I'm shooting for 1st."

Annabelle shrugged. "Fair point. However, we need my uncle to get there."

"I wouldn't worry so much. He's probably just doing some shady shit to

ensure we have the upper hand."

Annabelle overtly sighed. "You should really watch what you say out loud."

Mark scoffed to that. "Why? Because some little retard might amass the rest of the writhing retards in Coriander? Please, this is a man's game and I'm just the man to win it. That's why better women, like you, even give me the time of day, because I'm smart enough to feed the monsters, pretty or not, that keep me running this monocratic marathon. Speaking of which, I found that vehicle you were looking for and have it waiting in the private parking lot behind this very City Hall."

Annabelle hid her enthusiasm well with a subtle, "Thank you."

"You are very much welcome." He smirked.

Annabelle went back to ball-busting. "Seriously though, you had better be on your A-game out there; simple replies without convolution. Understood?"

Mayor Mark dawned the confidently benevolent kind of smile that could only be learned through being an awful person raised by equally awful people. "Yes ma'am. That's why I'm here, to help lovely young woman like you be happy."

She scoffed. "Yeah-yeah, save it for the moronic masses, Mark."

Even the Mayor's ensuing laugh was wrought with an unheard falsehood.

Annabelle lifted a curious ear and snipped, "Shut up."

Mark looked around with her for a silent second. "Um, what're we listening for?"

She sighed. "I could've sworn I heard

something, like an odd echo."

"Please, this room is sound proofed." He laughed and motioned to the ceiling. "You'd have to be an acrobat midget capable of climbing through tiny air vents to get in on this conversation."

Annabelle's face furiously contorted as she glared up at the small vent.

"What?" Mark quickly caught sight of the same blinking red light she was looking at. "You've gotta be fucking kidding me. Is that——"

"A camera," Annabelle snarled.

The mutilated hunk of camera dangled from a long length of rope. Its Jerry-rigged power source shot straight up to the man who was once a kid dropping stink bombs down the same vent.

Isiah cautiously kept the rope taut as he chuckled at the screen stuck in the mass of camera guts around his neck. "Nope, not a midget, just a camera man with a little ingenuity." He glanced around. "Well, even with no one around to hear that, this is still the best damn moment of my life."

Annabelle lunged for her purse.

Mark jumped as the girl whipped out a lengthy firearm with a lengthier silencer. "What the f——"

Before a curse word could be had, Annabelle was blasting the camera lens and ceiling décor to bits! The gun clicked with an empty clip before the enraged advisor chirped, "Shit!"

Isiah pulled up the smoking end of the destroyed rig. "Now that is one mean woman.

Mark had no words, stricken by the city's current plague of flabbergasted.

Annabelle the Advisor was a studious

woman, armed or not. "Okay, here's the plan. Change your clothes and I'll do the same." She grabbed an extra dress and pair of shoes from her purse.

Mark huffed, "You have an extra outfit?!"

"Of course, don't you?"

"No…"

"Well get one! And change your hair a little!"

By that point he'd stared at her in her undies long enough and Mark simply had to ask, "Why?"

Annabelle dropped her fists to her hips and harped, "Because I'm good at my damn job. Now hurry up, do what I said, and get ready to deny everything that was just recorded; if need be."

Mark sighed with an unfriendly grimace as he realized, "I bet the echo you heard was from the conference hall…"

"Well-then, need be it is."



The massive conference hall that was the hall in City Hall, had filled to the brim with people. However, silence had set in solidly at the end of the vent accented video that was once on the now blank teleprompter. Everyone, from hungry media hounds to the collectives of local supporters waving signs with Barter's name on them, found themselves flabbergasted by their Mayor's awfulness.

Standing in the middle amidst the silent many, guarded like a quarterback by his family, Barter was scratching his chin. Though shocking, he was ready for the

unexpected villainous that political people cleverly hid from those facing them; Barter had thoroughly done his research on men like Mayor Mark Michaelson.

The masses attentions' were moved to the marching young man and his entourage.

Barter and his family went right up on stage and took the podium like the powerful leaders of our past.

Thanks to a podium crash-course from Diana Folknor, Daring Dusky and Goth Windy were able to get the little black microphone turned on.

Daria kneeled and stood her son up on her leg; level with the microphone and her smiling face.

Barter gave the lil voice projection device a tap. He grinned a wide grin to the echo that rounded the hall. "My name is Barter, but you probably know that. This is my mother, Daria. My father, Dusky. My sister, Windy. And my good friend and Ambassador, Opol. My teacher and our United Nation's member assigned Educational Advocate, Ms. Yano…and also my pizza guy Luigi, for some reason."

Luigi gave a respectfully nervous wave. He hadn't realized that walking his love interest to her big meeting meant joining her campaign to change the world, but he was kind of okay with it.

Barter continued his speech; thrilled by the fact he'd remembered that whole united-advocate-whatever thing he'd already forgotten. "Together we know enough to move the world towards something that all of us can feel proud of for once, but we need your help."

Super Daria dared to say, "We are here

to announce our joint candidacy for mayor of Coriander, and inform the world that we are a group representative for the happiness of all people." She lifted Barter off her leg and let his father take the mic.

Few knew that Daring Dusky was no stranger to public speaking, especially the loud and passionate kind. "We wanna take the money and influence out of the hands of those with *too* much money and *too* much influence. We wanna put it back in the hands of people that *don't* want money or influence. People that understand leadership is a *sacrifice* and not a cushy position with benefits. We are here to *volunteer* our leadership to the people of not only Coriander, but people everywhere suffering under the thumbs of supposed leaders."

Goth Windy, though most certainly not a confident public speaker, took the willingly relinquished mic and continued the passionate words of Dusky. "And we're gonna start by helping the most important people to all of us; the children in our schools." She waved over a nervous Ms. Yano with Luigi giving a supportive nudge.

The middle school teacher was also no stranger to public speaking, but this was a whole different bag of worms. "Uh-em, my name is Yunashi Yano and I've taught the children of Coriander for the past seventeen years. And I can honestly say, I haven't been doing as good a job as I could've." Disapproving rabbles began to arise, but thankfully ending disapproving rabbles was part of being a teacher. "But this young man! Right here! Has improved the quality of teaching at Oliver Middle School more than I have in seventeen years."

A brave Diana Folknor in the making shouted, "Are you saying a child should be in charge of our children's education?!"

"No!" Ms. Yano cut that crap off quick. "I'm saying his ideas should be in charge of our children's education. Because I've never seen the children happier and more interested in learning after what he and his family have and are doing for us all."

"Is that so?!" Mayor Mark Michaelson roared as he marched up to the podium with Annabelle the Advisor; both fully wardrobe-changed. "Last I've heard!"—he shove his command upon the podium—"Members of this Davidson family are persons of question in multiple potential abuse cases. They are even wanted for questioning by the FBI and apparently guilty of cyber-fraud, according to the fake video shown here today."

Per a well-timed Super Daria boost, Brave Barter slammed his palms down on the podium and shoved his face into the mic with Mayor Mark. Without a malicious note, he said, "People won't believe your lies forever. Barter knows this, because he's a kid and has tried to lie lots of times; none of Barter's lies worked out well for him."

Mayor Mark still found this young man mesmerizing, but now was not the time for beholding oddities. "I'm sorry young man, but in the adult world you don't just call a man a liar; you give proof."

Isiah suddenly hollered from the very back of the room, "IS THIS PROOF ENOUGH!" He held the still smoldering wreckage of camera everyone had seen get shot.

"Hardly," Mark immediately belittled.

Barter sternly inquired, "What about Chris Pariah?"

Mark humbly sighed. "Young man, I have no idea who that is, but these attempted riots of yours have to stop."

As previously stated, Barter had done his homework and didn't take the bait. "He's the gunman who surrendered himself at my school today, and he's the man who told the world who hired him to hurt my family."

Mark shared a swift and displeased glance with his advisor before she leapt into the social media stream.

Awesome Opol's gentle combination of nudging foot and backhand made the Mayor move aside against his want, like musculoskeletal magic made by monks and martial arts.

Daring Dusky struck the emptied mic with a brief slew of facts. "His name is Colonel Biff Baden, and he has known relation with Mayor Michaelson's advisor as well as being a financial supporter of the Mayor's campaign."

Mayor Mark glanced back at his advisor's worried face for the literally breaking news, but she just tapped her wrist as a signal to keep it going until it was time. He took to the triad face-off at the podium. "Just like every candidate before, I am not responsible for the personal choices of my supporters."

Barter retort with a simple, but resounding, "Yes you are."

Before the Mayor could crash confusing uncertainty into Barter's argument, also known as politics, Daria jumped in. "Politicians sidestepping responsibility, like you just did, is the exact thing I've taught my son to never do."

Mark's next words faltered, catching

upon the nervous mucosal mass in need of clearing.

"Only people who like Barter for who he is, or wanna be what Barter likes, support him."

Mark didn't take the bait either, because he was a seasoned tactician. He glanced at his watch and concisely cursed, "Crap like this doesn't make America better; it makes it angry and destructive. And people like your family use criminal means to promote their antigovernment agendas."

The family and friends shook their heads and bit their tongues.

Thankfully, Opol had just the words. "Everything exists for a reason; antigovernment agendas exist because governments, local or not, always forget that there is no government without the people; using laws and rules to oppress rather than to protect."

Mayor Mark let his own personal perception slip. "Rules exist to protect us from radical socialist ideals like that."

Opol turned a sharp glare to the vile man. "And ideals exist to protect us from the fear-promoted perceptions you preach.

Mark was really starting to hate his nonsensical nemesis of cowboy ambassadors and big-mouthed boys, impatiently glancing at his watch. "The only thing these people need to be afraid of is non-American ambassadors overstepping the rules of a country they are a guest in." He glanced at the exit.

Being autistic, Barter was a master of glancing and had kept an internal tally of the Mayor's for the sake of deduction. "They're not coming."

Mark's brow arched at the boy, but his words waft political pomposity and basic human manipulation. "I will not let the good people, or the children, of Coriander have their safety undermined by lawbreaking criminals such as yourselves. Even now you break the rules put forth to protect this very building."

Brave Barter wisely replied, "If there are rules in the way of us changing the bad things we've done, then the first thing we need to change are those rules. We cannot live like slaves with dictated shackles or we will always be slaves—was what some smart guy said, but he was right."

Mark was beginning to form a flop sweat as he realized the flashy feds and subsequent timed-out arrest was direly late.



A small fleet of sour-nosed feds glared down the waving wooden monkey at the entrance to the zoo.

One of the agents with a better sense of humor hummed, "I don't think this is Coriander City Hall."

The younger agent leading them shot a sorry insisting stare his way.

"Sorry sir."

This was his first time leading a squad and something was no doubt hinky about this request to question; also, he hated his job and they didn't pay him enough. "Okay everyone, I'm calling in a review on this request…while we have lunch at the uh, em, the zoo of course."

Not a stiff suit among them argued

about it, their opinion aided the big sign advertising free large freezies with lunch. Because FBI agents love frozen fruit-flavored drinks.



The Mayor was running out of bullshit as his wristwatch and exit glances increased. "There is no use for ancient philosophy, young man, this is a modern—"

"They're not coming!" Barter abruptly interrupted with a firmly planted palm upon the podium. "Barter has no idea why you keep trying to make people hurt us!"

The Mayor dismissively shook his head as he secretly awaited the response of the rabbling media near the exit.

A loud equipment toting rookie hollered, "There's no one out there!"

Mayor Mark glanced back at Anabelle the Advisor and realized she was simply gone like the wind. He could feel the vein throbbing in his neck as panic increased his sweating.

Barter flared his nostrils and breathed the blue away, glad his mother was holding his unsteady legs, as he was ready to give this man the verbal ass kicking he needed. "You've sent police people, child protection people, biker people, and even news people after me. Why?"

"I—"

"Yeah-yeah," Barter nonchalantly interjected before another word could leave the Mayor's lips, "*You* had nothing to do with *any* of that… *Right*, just like Barter isn't a loud mouthed 8 year old…"

"Are you—"

Barter again belittled Mark's words by finishing them for him, "Yes I am calling you liar, because you are. Everyone here has now seen that, and even your own advisor has disappeared. But that's okay, Barter isn't mad at you. He just wants Mayor Mark to know that he can be better than what he's become."

Mayor Mark's ears began to ring as he looked out upon the hundreds of straight faces, all of them saying the same thing; that the show he'd put on was over. He slammed a fist to the podium, shuddering all but Barter! "You don't know a damn thing about me boy!"

"Then tell me, because the only thing Barter knows is how that was the most honest thing you've said this whole time."

Mayor Mark's anxiety, anger, and frantic fear boiled over like a pot of C4 and soap as he exploded with emotional shrapnel. "I'm the guy hippy-dippy socialists like you people need in charge!"

Barter mimicked his passion as he shouted, "Why!?"

"Because you're all too stupid to do what needs to be done! That's why MEN like me sit in chairs of leadership that trash like you would defile!" Mark realized, a little too late, that he'd said too much.

Jeers and disgust dour the rabbles of the crowd.

Daria didn't need to be super to say, "You should be ashamed of yourself sir," she just needed to be the mother she was.

Mark Michaelson now found himself at the end of his least ventured and least favorite road; defeat. He glanced back as if

Annabelle the Advisor would suddenly be back, but she was long gone in a brand new car.

The displeased hollers of the people turned to calls for the Mayor's resignation.

Mark fell into a fervent panic as he fixated on the 8 year old antagonist unto his existence. For, unapparent to the others, they were the ones who'd driven the man to an edge he didn't know he had; as righteousness can invoke wickedness just as much as wickedness can invoke righteousness.

Awestruck by the unification of people, even Opol failed to see the Mayor's move of desperate a madman.

Mark shoved Opol and then Daria off of their feet! He grabbed up the lightweight Barter from the air and sprinted off into the back, leaving the family momentary staggered with a lone pursuing Goth Windy.

Daria fumbled up upon her twisted ankle and hollered at everyone else, "GO SAVE BARTER!"

Barter futilely flailed as Mayor Mark beelined through the back room door. He slammed it shut behind him as he carelessly tossed the child to the floor! "YOU'RE GONNA TELL EVERYONE YOU LIED OR I'LL KILL YOU!"

"NO!" Barter bravely blurted with not a hint of hesitation.

Mark instantly wrapped his hands around the boy's throat and squeezed!

Barter suddenly wished he was better at hand to hand combat. His reddening face was working towards matching the blue he felt.

Goth Windy bashed through the door and leapt to the rescue! She turned the Mayor's malicious grasp to jelly with two taut fists to his shoulder blades! Her hands flowed up

from there as she tangled her fingers in his hair. Windy's feet wafted across the carpet as she yanked Mark back and down into the floor!

A deep thud rattled all the rage from the Mayor's head. He looked up in a daze at the enraged young woman kneeling over him.

Goth Windy growled between each brutal punch of her slow pummel! "Don't—you—ever—hurt—my—brother!" Her final blow ended with Mark's missing teeth and him huffing his head to the side before unconsciousness. She was at her brother's side in seconds, worrisomely humming, "Are you okay?"

Barter was very much not okay, many a colors now concussing his view with their pairing feeling of discomfort creating an extremely unpleasant amalgamation. He could but mumble with incoherence as the words sat in his psyche away from his lips. A flash of black struck him for a minute-long glint as he awoke to his entire family huddled around him on the floor, Dusky fearfully shouting at someone on the other side of a phone.

Opol carefully poked a few pressure points upon the boy's neck to aid blood flow.

Barter wanted more than anything to tell them it was okay, but he couldn't because it simply wasn't. No matter how hard Barter tried, it was as if his mind and body wouldn't work together anymore; then everything was gray and tired…

day 15
Stuck in a Bubble

Everything felt awful; and not like, I didn't sleep right couch-neck awful, more like I swallowed a cup of sand and got beaten up by professional wrestlers awful. Barter could hear everything about as much as he could see it, which felt like trying to communicate through molasses… He really hated the browns, they were by far worse than the greens or purples.

The blurs and blurbs about rambled and ranted at the boy to no avail.

For most people, 8 or 80, a moment such as this warrants only the utmost fear, but for Barter that was a secondary concern. He really just wanted some of Opol's special sweet tea right about now…and maybe a cheeseburger with extra cheese. His head finally hubbub enough ahead for him to realize that it felt like he were in a big bubble. And that was enough mental exercise to send his eyes bobbing under as he succumb to sleep.

DAY 16
Redefining Finite

He awoke with a resolute gasp, feeling as if he'd climbed from a pit of dreams and crumpled atop the reality above. Barter's eyes slowly focused as the colors eased into the cusp of his vision. Everything felt a confusing haze as he fought against every ounce of the gross draining his strength. Still upon his back, he turned his head to one side and peered out the door. Barter may've been brave, but right now he was just scared. "Mom," he rasped upon his bone-dry vocal cords, but the nurse in the hallway could only hear the conversation she was having.

"I'm sorry Mr. Opol, but he's still in a coma. I don't think he'll be wantin any tea anytime soon."

Opol removed his hat and gave the studious nurse a kind grin. "If it is alright with you, I think I will wait anyways…"

The nurse empathize with the man sitting in the ICU at 2 o'clock in the morning with a lidded cup of tea in his hand, waiting for a child to awake. "That's fine, you take as long as you need."

Barter flopped his head about and he realized the room was empty. His gaze widened as the nurse walked away and Opol entered his sight. He stretched his hand out to him and inaudibly croaked, "Opol…help…"

Opol's ears rang like never before as his head turned where he felt it must,

feeling every heartbreaking wave of his friend's desperation like an emotive antenna. The monk's feet near-floated over the floor in silence as he was at Barter's side within a few strides. Opol tossed the tea lid to the bed as he gently lifted the boy's head and the cup to his lips. "Drink my brother."

Barter let the liquid slide down his throat with eagerness, nearly choking a little as he downed the whole cup. He laid back and took a few deep breaths, grimacing at the tubes stuck in various parts of him; tubes he was steadily becoming more aware of. "The tea was cold."

Opol chuckled with joy. "Yes, well, in my defense you were sleeping a long time." He gave a helping hand and a propping pillow as Barter went to sit up.

"How long was Barter asleep? Where's his mom?" He smiled and dug into Opol's extended bag of natural treats; a recipe handed down through hundreds of years of healers and holy men.

"Nearly 2 days, and your mother is asleep in the waiting room with the rest of the family; just a short ways down the hall."

As the eastern medicine sweetened with raw honey goodness ran its course, Barter felt better and as a result so very much worse. "Barter's in a hospital like his grandpa was…"

"Yes…" Opol's happier demeanor eased back a great deal. "I will get you water and then some more tea——"

"Wait, what happened to the Mayor? And my cape? And what——"

Opol saved him the breath. "The Mayor

was taken to the hospital and arrested shortly after. His advisor and this Colonel have disappeared, the popular theory is that they have both fled to a non-extraditable country. And I believe your mother has been using your cape as a scarf and a pillow."

Barter half-assedly sighed, "One outta three bad guys aint bad."

The nurse paused in front of the door for a moment, then gasped her face off before ran away to tell the doctor and notify the family.

Opol chortled, "Indeed brother."

"Why do you keep calling Barter brother?"

The infinitely wise monk hadn't even realized that he was doing it. "Forgive me, I didn't mean to…"

Barter's weak grip grabbed Opol's hand. "Please, tell Barter what you know about him."

Opol let the words come like rain. "I once knew a monk that was like a brother to me in my youth, but he was not born with a strong body. However, that did not stymy his will." He smiled as he thought about him like he hadn't in ages. "No matter the cost to himself he would help others. One day there was a sudden storm and he went to the aid of the young monks training upon the monastery outskirts, suffice to say he grew ill and would not recover." Opol filled the empty tea cup with water for the famished young man. "On…on his last day of life he disappeared from his bed and was found helping an elderly woman across the road, sitting right there upon the edge of the road and passing away with a smile upon his face…"

Barter steadily finished off half the water and was working on doing the same with the treats. "You thinking Barter is a re-recurn-*reincarnation* of your brother?"

Opol breathed a burdened breath. "No matter what I feel, I know I seem to find myself feeling as if I know nothing. All I know for sure is that his indomitable spirit lives within you and the amazing things you have done."

He smiled wide. "Barter likes that, because he has trouble understanding most people's church-beliefs and stuff. It's like church people always wanna be afraid."

"Barter…" Daria droned in joy as tears wet her pre-reddened eyes, commandeered cape in hand. She lunged to the other side of the bed and held her son close.

Dusky and Windy followed suit with similar reactions as Dusky joined Daria and Windy drug Opol into the hug with her; everyone still wearing the same hero-garb from the other day.

"…Barter loves you too family, but he's having trouble breathing…"

Everyone stopped mashing the poor tubed-up boy with their affection.

Daria's face skewed as she chirped, "What're you eating?"

Barter replied, "Opol's Chinese-people candy, but he drank all the tea…can he have more tea please?"

Daria continued her confused chirping towards the monk and the boy. "Are you saying you drank tea, ate candy, and woke up-is he saying he drank tea-ate candy-and woke up?!"

Opol shrugged. "Kind of, yes."

Windy squawked what Daria was thinking,

"Well get the kid some more tea already! Get him all the damn tea!"

"Yes ma'am." Opol dashed out of the room like he were running the last leg of a race.

Barter's chewing slowed as he realized his family was standing there staring at him in an odd way. "What?"

Dusky hummed, "We're just really-really happy you're awake buddy."

"Guess he was tired," Barter chuckled.

His family lightheartedly laughed along.

By this point, Barter was savvy to the situation and preparing his query between chewing.

Opol rushed back into the room with an entire pot of lukewarm tea, pouring it into his cup.

He drank the soul-lifting beverage first, then asked the very query he was scared to know. "Is Barter sick?"

Slightly agape mouths and watery eyes rounded his family as no answer was given.

Opol took to the hard questions out of kindness. "Yes…"

"What kind of sick is he?"

"They are still trying to figure that out…"

A bespectacled eastern doctor huffed into the room, sending the nurse behind him to work checking everything. The doctor's words eluded him as his head tilt and he just asked, "What're you eating?"

The pepping-up pup replied, "Barter's eating Chinese-people candy and magic monk tea made from organs…wait, no, *organics*."

The doctor had no idea what to say to that, but the chart in his hand reminded him

why he was there. "I-um, perhaps we'd best step outside and talk…"

"Barter isn't afraid, you can tell him the truth."

His uncompromising family stood beside him.

Windy assuring that with a confirming, "You heard my brother."

The doc cleared his throat and scratched his mud-haired head. "Okay-then, um, well, an abnormality in one of your son's tests brought us to a stroke of luck in diagnosing…" The doctor didn't feel right about using the word 'luck' knowing what he now had to tell them. "Anyways, your son—"

"I'm right here," Barter griped, making sure he had the doctor's attention.

The doc straightened his glasses and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, you have a disease called Tay-Sachs. Simply put, you are missing an enzyme we are all born with called Hex-A."

Daria hopefully hummed, "So we just need to get him some more enzymes, right?"

Doctor DeShini was very good at his job, but dealing with cases like this made him wish he wasn't. "I'm very sorry, but it isn't that simple."

Dusky impatiently croaked, "Well-what the heck does that mean?!"

The doctor explained the facts. "Tay-Sachs causes progressive destruction of the nervous system and brain, of which there is no known treatment for other than symptom management."

"So Barter need's medicine? Like, he needs to eat old-people pills?"

Doctor Dashini's shoulder's slumped. "I'm—I'm so very sorry, but the average

lifespan of a child with Tay-Sachs is five years. I have no idea how you've lived past that without symptom management, but from here on the best I can do is make you comfortable."

Hearts sank all around as furious brows gave way upon the parent's visages.

"What are you saying!?" Daria screeched as she jumped up and pointed her finger at the doctor with bossy certainty. "What the fuck do you think you're talking about?! You're a damn doctor! So—do something to help my son!"

A somber sorrow soaked Dr. Dashini's expression. In search of hope, he glanced at the nurse rereading the monitors and machines analyzing the boy's body.

She could but subtly shake her head and lower eyes.

The doctor removed his glasses and said his peace as the fancy college he went to had taught. "We're doing everything we can for your son, but his condition is only getting worse and"—he looked the brave young man in the eyes in spite of his welling sadness not taught in any college—"And at this rate I'm afraid you have hours or days at best before there is nothing we can do to keep your body going. I'm sorry, I'll leave you with your family, but assure you that I will personally be nearby…" Dr. Dashini would always remember those words as the most difficult words he'd ever said to anyone.

The nurse promptly left with the doctor; unable to look a single member of that family in the eyes and the mere thought of such making her want to burst into tears.

Barter looked confused for a moment

with his family's shocked sobbing sitting upon the ambience. He calmly queried, "So…Barter's gonna be dead in a hospital like Grandpa?"

His parents sobbing turned to gushing tears as Windy angrily harped, "Nope! No, I'm not gonna do it. I'm gonna look that shit up, because doctors are insurance-paid *liars*. What did he say it was, Teddy-Sacks?"

Opol somberly said, "It is Tay-Sach."

"Whatever!" Windy stomped over to the corner with her face in her phone.

Barter spilt his tea a little as he normally snapped, "Why is no one answering my question!?"

Windy kept on searching and reading as she barked, "Cause it's a stupid question!"

Having lived long enough to know time was not a thing wisely wasted, Opol answered the boy with a harsh catch in his throat. "Yes, it means that death will be the next stage in your life…"

Daria buried her head into Dusky's chest and cried as she never had, while he let his tears fall with averted eyes; for she refused to let Barter see her hopeless tears and he refused to show his son the weakness in his eyes.

Barter's nostrils flared and his eyes watered as he huffed a hefty breath. "Well that *really sucks*…"

Windy's phone fell to the floor as she stood there for a brief second, before bursting over to Barter and wrapping her arms around him as she let the sorrow flow free.

It wasn't long before the other's followed suit, Opol wrapping his arms around the width of them as they held the 8 year

old still trying to wrap his little head around a concept most adults cant.

Barter cried as any kid would before such a fate, but something different he'd brewed all himself arose beneath that stereotypical hopelessness. "No!" Barter shouted as he tossed his hands in the air, parting his adoring family like waves. He smacked those hands back down into the bed! With tea spilt everywhere, Barter barked his truth to his perplexed kin, "I'm not done yet! Barter still has to do stuff-so take these stupid tubes out of him right now."

Daria sobbed the worst thing she'd ever said to her son, "Those tubes are keeping you alive…"

Barter flopped about in exacerbation. "Well-what the fuck!"

"Barter!" Daria habitually reprimanded.

Barter just held up his tubed arms and gave his mom a look.

Daria sadly hummed, "Never mind, you get a permanent pass on all cuss words"—she smashed his face against hers—"But don't go crazy with it-I love you so much-okay?"

Often disparaged by his mother's cheek-mashing affection, Barter found himself sucking up her love like it were the last second he had left. "He loves you so much too mom." It suddenly hit him like the epiphany it was. "Barter needs to see one of those legal-system-story-writer kinda people that give all your shit away when you're dead."

Dinged phone in hand, Goth Windy went to work as soon as the words had left her brother's mouth. "I don't think there's anyone that writes anything open at 2 am…"

Dusky suggested, "Ask the doctor, cause

that sounds like the kinda thing that'd be right up his alley."

"I'm on it." Windy 'whooshed' out of the room, harassing the first nurse she saw.

Opol inquired, "Would you like more tea?"

"*Yes*," Barter droned in perfect annoyance of death's daunting timeframe, "*Please*."

Opol poured the boy his tea with but an amused grin, reveling in his larger-than-life personality.

Windy waft back into the room, huffing like she'd run a gothic-themed marathon. "Okay—so—the nurse—doctor—they'll send a guy—like right away'ish." She finally caught her breath a little. "The docs already working on waking him up, cause he's, like, the on call legal guy for people that're…" Her adrenaline atrophy upon the words she simply couldn't say about the little brother she loved.

Barter may've been dying, but his wit was running on all cylinders. "Barter loves you so much, big sis," he said to end her awkward silence, didn't help with her tears any though.

"I love you too!" She blurted as she burst past Dusky and Daria, lovingly smashing her brother into his pillow.

"Ow," Barter said with a thick undertone of laughter that was superseded by the huge smile on his face.

"*Ooh-sorry*," Windy cooed as she carefully eased away. "You okay?"

"Barter's fine, shut up and hug him some more."

Windy gladly obliged, but with a little less velocity this time and a few additional

arms from her family.

Barter's belly belittled the current hug fest with an elongated grumble.

Dusky chuckled, "Was that your tummy dude?"

Barter lifted the empty bag of Opol-made treats and shook it as though more might fall out.

Opol laughed abruptly and aloud. He cleared his throat to his adoptive family's grinning faces. "Forgive me, that was odd, I—"

"Nope," Daria interjected, "You never have to explain yourself for being happy in this family"—she tossed a friendly, but stern, finger at him—"You got that mister monk man?"

"Yes ma'am." Opol replied with an ear to ear smile.

"Well Barter has to explain himself, because he's starving."

This time they all laughed aloud.

Opol reported, "All I have left is tea, but I am certain I can find you something else."

"That's right," Dusky seconded. "Just tell us what you want to munch on and we'll find it."

Barter grew very somber for a moment. He'd realized that this could very well be his last meal… Although the tea was perfect and needed only warming, he still longed for something that touched bases with everything he loved about food. Barter took a deep breath.

Daria concernedly hummed, "You okay?"

"Barter's fine, but the food he wants is kinda crazy…"

Windy felt the need to point-out,

"Yeah-but, is it crazier than dressing like superheroes, storming City Hall, and defeating an evil mayor with your righteous words?"

Barter beamed at Windy. "Barter is *so* happy you became his sister."

"Me too," Windy sobbed as she burst into tears, again, and enwrapped the poor boy in her arms.

Barter sighed. "Barter keeps making Windy cry. What does he do?"

Opol stated what he saw of such a thing. "I do not believe it is possible to stop her, nor necessary."

Daria lovingly harped, "Just tell us what you want so we can get it for you, okay?!"

"Okay," Barter huffed as Windy gave an extra squeeze. "Barter wants chicken fried chicken on top of mashed potatoes with country gravy and buttery corn over the top, then for desert he wants a big banana split with scoops of cookies and cream, mint chocolate chip, vanilla, and rocky road ice creams…oh-and the whole thing needs to be topped with whipped cream and chocolate syrup and no gross cherries…" He took a deep breath after that.

Honestly, not a one of them expected anything less from their mini-miracle of a young man, the understanding smiles upon their faces purveying exactly that.

Dusky jested, "I might have to write that down."

Awesome Opol took point on this crucial mission. "I suggest we all split up. I am familiar with some of the cafeteria staff and can inquire there. Then the rest of you can check a different neighboring block for

restaurants with owners that don't mind being woken up in the middle of the night."

Daria's glancing caught Barter's arising enthusiasm, so she struck her fist forward over the bed and boldly drummed, "Go family."

They all struck a fist to hers and turned to Barter with big grins as they awaited their leader.

Oh how Barter loved a good superhero team fist bump, but he loved the people in the team far more. He struck a dramatic fist to theirs and gave the word, "Go best family ever!"

They all leapt and skipped and hopped out of the room with Dusky chirping behind them, "Hey, I still need somebody to write it down for me."

"Wait!" Barter abruptly hollered as everyone piled back up in the doorway. "Mom, you need to take the secret weapon out of Barter's pocket"—he grimaced at his hospital gown—"Wherever his clothes are."

Daria fumbled from the family-stack and went right to the drawer she'd put them in. A smile strung across her cheeks as she removed the bright colored bag of sour worms from his pocket. She quickly realized that there were no gummy treats inside. Daria's eyes widened and her jaw dropped at the wad of cash within. She gave it a rough count and squawked, "Barter?! Why do you have over two thousand dollars in your pocket?!"

The rest of the family gave the money a similar look.

Barter adamantly shook his head. "Sorry guys, you're just gonna have to trust that Barter has already explained that…"

Despite their utter shock, money was

the last of their concerns.

Windy said what they were thinking. "Can we use it to get you awesome food?"

"Barter doesn't see any other choice." His smirk was contagious.

Daria and Dusky shook their heads in proud approval of their astoundingly resourceful son; the worry of where he'd gotten any money a superficial afterthought.

With tears held-back, Daria gushed, "You have always amazed me, Barter…"

Dusky gave his loving assurance. "You stay strong and be patient, we'll be back as soon as we can."

"Don't you worry about Barter, he aint goin anywhere without his family."

Daria evenly dished out the cash as they all scampered out of the room, blowing kisses and preaching praises as not a one of them wanted to leave the boy's side.

Barter chuckled and chortled as his family ran off to cause creative trouble on his behest. He abruptly stopped with a tummy tucking, "Ooh… Barter thinks he drank too much tea…" Barter grinned at the bathroom door in the corner, then grimaced at the amalgamation of medical tubes and wires tying him to the bed; one in particular he'd just become aware of. "What the ass?! Hey! Barter has to pee! Can someone please take the tube out of his dinky!?"

DAY 16
Finite Friends

Carlos of the cafeteria crew may've been "in charge" but the expression on his face didn't bode confidence. "Um, *yeah*, I'd have ta have that written down, and even then I don't think I can make anything like that here." He leaned in and whispered to Opol, "It's all frozen white-people food."

Opol sighed with momentary defeat. "I understand, thank you anyways."

Carlos used his curiosity to halt up the monk about to beeline out of there. "So are you for real? There's really a kid up there that's gonna—you know, and you're trying to hook him up?"

"Yes, but I worry I might fail him… Anyways, thank you for your time; I must keep looking."

Carlos again stopped the monk, but this time with something a little more useful. "Hold on man." He pulled a tattered card from his pocket and handed it to the most interesting monk he'd ever met; less the fact he'd only met one. "My cousin Carlotta owns an ice cream truck that she rents out for kids parties, and she never turns her phone off. Just call and tell her that Carlos said it's what Jesus would do and tell her what you told me."

Opol had traveled the world and the worst amongst the best of what people have to offer, but for some reason being Barter's brother had made him see in people what he once saw less of. The monk respectfully

shook his hand. "Thank you," he said before leaving, his search turning towards any phone he might commandeer. Fortunately, one such option was already walking his way.

Unfortunately for the young NICU nurse stuck with the night shift, she was walking his way. She trolled the internet on her phone, searching something to keep her awake that wasn't diarrhea inducing coffee, moronic videos of morons, or regrettable porn.

"Excuse me?" Opol politely said to the buxom and bold brunette, removing his hat as a gentlemen would.

She lifted her face from the unfulfilling artificiality of the internet and smiled. Unsure what was happening, but thoroughly interested in the unusual situation, she went into nurse-mode. "Yes? Can I help you sir?"

"Yes, may I please borrow your phone to call the ice cream truck service on this paper card so my dying brother can possibly acquire a banana split?"

The addictive interesting of the internet took a backseat. She closed the app hard and handed him the phone. "Yeah, sure."

Opol beamed with joy. "Thank you so much, I greatly appreciate you."

"Sure." Though her buxom was showing more than her bold, she decided to gently turn that corner. "My name's Destiny Benton."

Opol carefully tapped the little phone icon and typed in each number to the electronic tool he was very much not an expert with, stopping to politely bow and shake her hand. "Opol Addanoholjai, it is a pleasure to meet you, Destiny." The thought

of her name humbled him to the core, but he kept to his digital task.

"Wait, there's ice cream trucks that have banana splits?"

"Eureka!" Opol whooped as the phone began to make a ringing sound. "Forgive me, I get excited when I can make one of these things work, and I am afraid my knowledge of ice cream trucks is similarly limited."

"What!?" An unquestionably unpleasant woman screeched from the phone speaker.

Opol eagerly lifted the phone up a foot from his face. "Hello, my name is——"

"What!?"

Destiny provided her subtle aid by tapping the speakerphone icon for the tech-deficient monk.

"My name is Opol and I am in need of your services; your cousin Carlos told me to tell you that it is what a man named Jesus would do…" In all of his infinite wisdom, he'd just realized exactly which Jesus Carlos had meant.

"Carlos!? I'm gonna whoop that boy's behind!" In spite of Carlotta's obvious enragement, she was a business woman. **"What do you want?! And you'd better have cash on hand!"**

Opol respectfully cleared his throat before the independent woman of no nonsense. "Yes ma'am, I indeed do have cash. And what I need is a banana split with——"

"Ice cream truck services don't have banana splits!"

"I see." Opol whispered to Destiny, "It seems our question has been answered."

Destiny was amused.

"I have ice cream! Lots of it!"

Opol knew not everything in this world

could be acquired in whole before first gathering its parts; a wagon must need wheels as much as a voice must need ears. "I need cookies and cream, mint chocolate chip, vanilla, and rocky road ice cream delivered to—" He looked to Destiny for aid as once again this infinite wisdom he'd supposedly acquired eluded him.

Destiny obliged. "East Clove Hospital, the one near Anise Park.

"East Clove Hospital"—Opol carefully repeated as he kept an eye out for Destiny's approving nod—"The one near Anise Park."

Carlotta croaked, **"The big park in the middle of the city?!"**

Opol waited for Destiny's giggling nod before replying, "Yes ma'am."

You could almost hear Carlotta's greed-gears turning as she did the math and found the belief to step past her own personal grump. **"Alright-fine! 200 dollars…unless yer poor, than maybe less…"**

"Oh, um, does it help that I am a monk who has detached from earthly possessions and also have 200 dollars?"

Carlotta's tone calmed. **"Um, yeah, it does. I'll have a truck there in a few hours."**

Opol politely queried, "Would it be possible to have one much sooner if I gave you"—he took a second to roughly count the wad of cash in his pocket as he curiously widened the eyes of Destiny—"What I believe to be 500 dollars or more?"

Carlotta cutely cackled for a quick second. **"Scuse me, uh-em. I think I can do that, but I need someone waiting out front for us."**

Opol beamed with hope. "Consider it

done. Simply look for the monk in a cowboy hat."

"Wha—"

The eager monk poked the end call tab before Carlotta's curiosity could be clarified. He handed the phone back as he shared a smile with Destiny. "Thank you so very much. I should head outside."

Destiny rarely minced words. "If you don't mind, I'd like to tag along."

Opol had not expected that, once again infinite wisdom seeming less useful than common sense and manners. "May I ask why?"

"Because I'm on call, which usually means I get about 2 hours of real work on my 9 hour shift." Despite Destiny's honesty, she'd a better reason. "Also, I'm betting you have no idea where you're going."

Opol chortled. "Those points are quite valid, both personally and realistically."

"That sounds like a yes to me." Destiny often heard what she wanted, but *usually* in a good way.

Opol was in no position to refuse the young woman who'd aided him in these fateful hours. "The company would be welcomed."

Once again, as their walk began with a young man's destiny leading their way, Destiny didn't refrain. "So, you single? My grandma's about your age."

"Actually, I have taken a vow of celibacy."

"Respect, I love orgasms *way* too much to even think about doing that." Destiny had a realization. "And now I know why they keep putting me on the graveyard shift, because I talk about orgasms with strangers…"

"I enjoy a brazenly spoken woman. I have lived in and visited many a places

where women are oppressed in their freedoms of speech."

"You're a weird guy, but I like that. …You do kinda look familiar…"

"I was on the news recently."

"What?!"



Dusky glared at the fast food restaurant, wondering just how illegal it was to break into one. He griped, "*Nah*, my son deserves better than that crap." Dusky first caught sight of the homemade going out of business sign in the window before he noticed the store's name.

Above the drab hole in the wall of an eatery was a very faded yellow sign that read: Hank's Hamburgers

Dusky didn't know why and he didn't need to know why, because his feet were carrying him towards the place he just felt he had to be. He peeked through the window at the disheveled micro-diner inside, items placed about as though it were a yard sale. Dusky saw no sign of life, but stood there for a moment as the cool of the midnight-dark morning sent a shiver up his spine.

Coughing echoed from the connecting alley.

With nothing to lose, Dusky investigated the sound in the hopes it wasn't a disgruntled dissident.

Round a garbage bin at the back end of Hank's Hamburgers was a bag-eyed man of burly stature. He sat upon the sad concrete step chain-smoking cigarettes with the door partially propped open behind him.

Dusky did as Barter would and didn't

hesitate for a second. "Excuse me, sorry to bother you—"

"Piss off meth-head," the man gruffly spat without even glancing Dusky's way.

"Not a meth-head," Dusky shrugged off Barter-style, "Just a guy lookin for chicken fried chicken for his sick son."

The man looked at him now, face puckered in confusion as smoke drifted about from his derailed drag. "Nice story crack-head, now don't make me use the gun I got propping the door open."

"Not a crack-head either, look"—Dusky dangled the money about the air—"What crack-head you know actually has money."

The man looked around as though he were trying to make sense of what was happening. "What kinda dad gets food for their kid at 2 am?"

"A dad that'd do anything for their son," Dusky replied without skipping a beat.

The man took a moment to look Dusky up and down. "Did you say your kid was sick?"

"Yeah…" Dusky's face said a great deal more than his simple response.

"What? Does he got the flu or somethin?"

"No…" Little did Dusky know, he wasn't the only one in that alley dealing with the prospect of death.

The melancholy man was expecting to sit on his stoop smoking until he got the courage to blow his brains out with the same revolver keeping the door wedged open. Being a man who often overthought everything, he stepped outside of this disabling comfort zone and extended his hand to the cash waving stranger. "The name's Hank."

"Dusky." He shook the diner owner's

hand with appropriate vigor. "So, any chance on that"—he had to halt and consult the list in his pocket—"Chicken fried chicken on top of mash potatoes with country gravy and buttery corn?"

Hank was beginning to think he had already shot himself and was in some sort of weird Purgatory. "I—hate cooking…"

Dusky drew a dismissive scoff. "Oh-bullshit, ya gotta love something before you can hate it."

Hank snuffed out his remaining cigarette. "I'm gonna need something a bit stronger if you want me to cook my ex-wives favorite dish."

Dusky's tongue stuck out as he dug into the secret stash pocket in his jacket. "Ah-ha," he announced as he sprung out the big ganja doobie. "Will this suffice?" Dusky learned that word from his son.

Hank was beginning to think this version of Purgatory wasn't gonna be so bad. "Now you're speaking my language, throw in some of that cash and I think we have a deal."

"Seriously?!" Dusky huffed in excitement.

Hank snagged the doobie, lit it, and took a drag. "*Oh yeah*, we definitely have a deal… Damn, blueberries…mmm…"

"Yes!" Dusky cheered in victory. "Marijuana and determination save the day once again."

"If you say so man…mmm, blueberries." Hank noticed the urgency in Dusky's feet and, with the herbal assist, finally had to ask, "So this kid of yours, just how sick is he?"

Dourness drenched Dusky's face. "He-

uh…Barter isn't going to… Sorry, I-uh, I-I'm sorry, but I just can't say it…" He pushed back the tears, because now wasn't the time for his suffering; it was the time to act.

As the medicinal plant unpuckered Hank's attitude, that name bobbled about his brain. "Did you say your kid's name was Barter? Like that kid on the news?"

Dusky's smile returned as a resurgence of pride pumped through his veins, because not even death can change a father feeling proud of their son. "That's him, that's my son."

"Well then, I guess we'd better get to work." Hank grabbed his revolver and stood up in the doorway, checking the bullets in it to make sure they really were all there. "First, I need you to do something important for me."

Dusky looked very worried. "*Umm*…what? I mean, I can't really cook and I don't like guns, so—"

"No ya idiot, I need you to go inside and take the batteries out of the smoke alarms so I can get high inside without settin em off."

Now that, Dusky could do and had done before for the exact same reason.



Daria's brow had dropped a few millimeters after peaking in every closed shop around the block. And rounding the corner to Windy rounding the corner of the other block with a similar forehead didn't help her state of mind. "Son of fucking bitch!"

"Shh!" Windy said as she crossed the

street. "Don't go screaming like that or someone will call the cops on us."

"Good. Maybe they can open one of these DAMN SHOPS!"

"Shh!"

"Oh-you-shh."

Windy couldn't help grinning at that, tossing her hands into the air moments later in exacerbation. "What're we gonna do mom?"

"I dunno…" Daria's lip began to quiver as a tremulous tone tainted her words. "I can't do it, I can't think about not and—why am I wandering around the streets instead of—I can't think about Barter and—I can't do it Windy-I can't-I just can't-I—"

Goth Windy pinned her mother's shaking fists to her side as she interrupted with love. "Shh-it's okay mom. Don't worry. We'll think of something."

Daria sobbed, "But what if we can't?"

"Screw that crap, we'll find a way." Windy's eyes caught the organic banana sale sign in the window behind Daria. Then she looked up at the store's name and knew it was fate. She turned Daria around, pointed at the sign, and said, "Check it out, it's one of those freaky-coincidence universe signs."

Daria's smile returned to her as she read: GOOD BARTER GROCER. "Well alight then, let's break the window and get this done."

"Whoa-whoa-whoa! Put the brick down. Where did you get a brick?!"

Daria casually replied, "I picked it up in case we needed to break a window," and readied the brick for flying.

Windy wisely grabbed the brick from her mother. "Dude?! Your juvenile delinquent

daughter should be the one doing the crimes that you talk her down from doing…yeah-that makes sense, right?"

Daria crossed her arms. "Fine then, you throw the brick through the window."

"Nobody's throwing a brick through a window mom."

Daria's arms did not uncross with any form of approval. "Well than you'd better find me a different way to get in that store or it's gonna have a broken window. Now give me my brick back."

"I think I'll hang onto the brick for now." Windy quickly regretted that as a pair of headlights rounded the corner and shined over them, hiding the brick behind her back.

The two ladies froze like deer before the hefty rapping of the big truck engine.

"See Harold!" A scratchy voiced older woman harped. "I told you they aint lesbian hookers!"

Harold hummed, "Well damn Hanna-Banana, it is them news gals."

"See," Hanna said. "Glad I talked you outta callin the cops, huh hon? And turn off the damn headlights before ya blind them gals."

"Sorry," Harold said as he turned the high-beams off and their old red truck.

Windy and Daria's demeanors lax at the sight of the elderly couple in their matching green pajamas with cabbages printed on them.

The gray-haired Harold scampered up to the gals and croaked, "What're you ladies doing out here setting off my motion camera at this ridiculous hour?!"

They looked up at the camera that was pretty much right above their heads and both

'huh' with humility.

A white-haired Hanna, less a single poorly dyed green swatch, gently smacked her husband on the arm. "Don't listen to him, he's always an ass if you wake him up."

Harold sarcastically droned in defeat, "*Thanks dear…*"

"See?" She audibly whispered at the mother and daughter. "Anyways, what the heck are you two doin out here at two in the morning?"

Daria opened her mouth, but still couldn't say it. So she turned her gaze to the daughter she trusted.

Goth Windy gave herself a focusing inhale and a calming exhale. "We're here on urgent family business. We have to help my brother Barter by getting him a banana split…"

The couple looked at one another to make sure they'd heard the same equally baffling thing.

Hanna cleared the loud from her throat with a 'hork'. "Scuse me. How is a banana split urgent?"

Windy grabbed ahold of that question before Daria's hidden tears could. "It's hard for us to explain…" She didn't do a great job of it though.

Harold harped, "Well it's damn cold out here; so you'd better try."

Hanna could now hear and see the hurt that'd stained their faces and tones. She pat her husband on the back, instead of the usual and deserving smack upside the head. "Harold, hon, I think somethin might be wrong with that Barter boy on the news."

Harold's rudely awoken distemper was still getting the best of him. "Well-yeah I

know that"—he leaned in a little and whispered the rest to his wife—"But it's rude to be talkin about people's kids like that."

Hanna bonked him upside the head; she'd held back as long as she could. "No you damn crazy old crank! Think about it, they aint runnin round lookin for ice cream at this ungodly hour cause O' autism…"

Harold looked into his wife's wide eyes for a good long moment. "…Oh… Well damn." He knew exactly what to do. "Well come on inside then. Whatever you want is on the house."

Windy's surprise got the best of her as she accidently dropped the brick behind her.

Harold questioned his reality. "Did that gal just shit a brick?"

As she had the past 42 years, Hanna had his back. "Don't be stupid, she was just hidin it for some reason I'm sure she'll explain…"

Windy's guilty grin didn't help her situation.

But Daria had her back. "Actually, it was my brick. I picked it up out of desperation and she took it from me before I could break your window and steal some bananas…"

The second of silence around the street ended as the old couple exploded into laughter.

Hanna huffed, "We don't care about that."

Harold huffed, "We're just glad ya'll wanna push that Mayor out."

Windy and Daria both asked, "Why?"

Hanna's nostrils flared. "I swear, you young people only use that internet fer

lookin at wieners and ginas. That damn Mayor has his whole bullshit agenda up on his lil ego-site; small business destroyin proposals and everything."

Harold scoffed, "Yup. Politicians like to tell them 'stimulating the economy' kinda lies. But you folks, you shoot it from the hip and folks like us need that; heck, everyone needs that." He headed for the store without another word, waving them on.

Windy said, "We can't thank you enough."

Hanna grinned from ear to ear. "Oh I'm sure you can."

Daria pulled the money from her pocket and asked, "Would you take a donation? You know, as local business owners?"

"Ooh," Windy enthusiastically cooed as she added her wad of money to the donation pool. "Here, you can have this too."

Hanna's mouth opened with want of the word yes and her hands itched for the cash, but she didn't. "I dunno, you folks might need that money and yer kids sick and—"

"Take the damn money!" Harold harped from ahead as he unlocked the doors. "We aint saints woman!"

Hanna looked at the mother and daughter's generous grins, sighing in acceptable defeat. "Okay, thank you. You gals at least got a grocery list we can help ya get together?"

Windy handed her list to Hanna, because Daria had learned to semi-memorize grocery lists years ago.

Hanna pulled out her bent and bed-beaten reading glasses, perusing the list. "We can help you with a lot of the basic groceries, but we can't make any of this

diner-food nonsense."

Daria said, "Anything helps."

Harold was better with his hands than his words, so he snagged the list from his wife and went to work with a nearby cart.

Having had most of her recent discussions with the hard-headed likes of Harold, Hanna didn't hold back with the people she'd never met and yet greatly respected. "Harold and I had a daughter once. She died of stomach cancer at the age of eleven and not a one of them doctors could tell us why she got that damn cancer. But some years later, when we were packin up her room, we realized how much she loved these damn peanut butter cups—"

A nearby Harold couldn't help hopping in. "Cause the tricky girl had em stashed everywhere, even though we bought them whenever she wanted." He sadly grinned as he thought about her a little more.

Hanna went on. "Then we noticed they had some weird things in their ingredients. To make a long story short, them food companies are poisoning children with candy and the two of us couldn't stop em even if we wanted to. So, we opened a store where people could get fairly priced food with none of them FDA approved cancer-chemicals. And that's why we need you folks ta take down monsters like Mark Michaelson before they go makin metropolises of our damn neighborhoods and super-centers outta local grocers. Damn rich fools makin us think more is better, but more aint never better when it's bein sold by those with too much already."

Harold sang from an aisle away, "I love you Hanna-Banana! *Take from the rich and*

feed the poor until there are no rich no more!"

"Don't mind him," a blushing Hanna hummed. "That crazy old activist gets a little overzealous sometimes."

Daria chortled as she grabbed a cart too. "My whole family's overzealous."

Hanna adamantly nodded in agreement. "I've noticed."

Windy suddenly gasped at the sight ahead. "Is that an entire aisle of chocolate things?!"

Hanna was quite proud of that one. "Yup, and the aisle behind it has even more; all of it organic, homemade by local bakers, and 100% cancer-causing-crap free…well, except for all that damn sugar and old-fashioned lead-heavy cocoa. Too much sugar aint good for anyone, even if it's all cane sugar."

Windy had to say, "I feel like Barter would strongly disagree."

Daria beamed as she added, "And he might even say it like that."

The three shared a short laugh.

Hanna saw the sad slumping back into their expressions and had to know. "That kids gonna be a great leader one day, I hope?"

Super Daria looked her in the eyes and gave her the truth, because kind and courageous women like Hanna deserve it. "No," she said as her voice instantly grew weak and her face filled with fear. "He uh"—she took a second to swallow her sorrow—"The doctor called it Tay-Sachs, and it um…it…"

Goth Windy calmly clarified for her mother. "Its number one on my list of the worst things I've ever learned about…" She

bore the same sorrow as Daria.

Hanna abruptly swallowed her tears and cleared her cluttering tone. "Well then, we'd better grab a couple more carts," she said as she scampered off.

"Why?" Windy inquired.

Hanna harped back, "For all the candy ya dumby!"

Neither the depressed Daria nor her equally unhappy daughter were about to say no to an entire aisle made of chocolate; that they of course could eat at until they were too sick to be sad.

Harold scooted by at the end of the aisle, giving a playful drive by shout of, "You gals gonna make the man do all the shoppin er what!?"

Windy and Daria didn't hesitate to start filling carts with one hand as they sampled decadent delights with the others. Their chocolate chariot race was the final piece on a plate of what was sure to be filled with far too much food and a few new friends.

DAY 16
Food & Fate

Barter hated the clock on the wall, but it was nothing personal; he'd always hated clocks, with exception of the big old ticking ones.

Time had teetered by for the boy with nary an interesting anomaly or doctor visit.

The one problem with being mindful, like Barter had learned to do, was that distracting himself with the clock was nearly impossible. "Dammit! Why'd Barter have to get hungry?! *Ugh*, he really hates being alone a *gargantuan* more than being hungry…" Barter began to feel a little groggy. "Maybe I needs, I mean, maybe I need a nap. Man it's hard to talk like that sometimes."

A nurse zipped by the door before the boy could even raise his head to her.

Barter sighed and his eyes slumped for but a few seconds before they shot open and his back straightened. "No! That tired doesn't feel right… I *need* to stay awake… Stupid fucking clock!"

"Is everything okay in here?" The bespectacled nurse with auburn hair asked, barely setting into her shift.

"*No!*" Barter guffaw in utter unhappiness, droning on afterward. "Barter's hungry made his family go away, and he hates clocks, and he's scared of being alone, and he's afraid of sleeping cause he's gonna die from Titty-Sacks."

The poor nurse was far from ready for

any that, even after being apprised to the situation. "Um, *well*, I can come in and hang out if you want?"

Barter adamantly nodded.

"Okay, um, *so… Um…* It's kinda cold outside…"

"Are you bad at talking?"

She sighed. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what to say to *you*; the kid on the news making real things happen."

"Barter does see how it'd be hard to talk to him after all the crazy stuff he's done."

"I-know-right? I'm just some lonely nobody living in a lonely apartment. My parents suck so I just ignore them, and I definitely waste *way* too much time watching garbage romance medical shows."

Barter widely smiled at the awkward young woman.

"What?"

"One of Barter's favorite new things is how people open up to him."

The nurse laughed as even she hadn't realized she'd been gushing. "Yeah-I guess I kinda was-huh… You really do have a way with people."

"Thank you, and Barter thinks you have very pretty hair."

The nurse bubbled over with the first compliment she'd received in months. "That is very sweet, thank you. I thought about changing it, but all those hair dying boxes have very intimidating woman on them…"

"Yeah, Barter always thought those hair box girls looked angry and sad. He thinks it's because looking pretty isn't a real job."

"I-know-Right? I mean, it's not like

anyone's getting paid for being ugly."

They shared a short chuckle over that one.

The nurse sighed. "…I gotta say, it's really weird talking to a kid like an adult."

"Barter understands. He's never felt he was good at being a kid; except for video games, he got good at video games like kids are—supposed…to…" The last of his words had stretched out as they left an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

Recalling that she was apprised to the boy's medical situation, the nurse asked, "Are you feeling okay?" She checked over his monitors and lines just to be cautious.

"Barter's okay…no-wait. Barter isn't okay at all, he's all—fuckered-up like St. Jude's and won't be able to help people stop having to supposed to."

"*Um*, I have no idea what any of that means, except for the St. Jude's reference that I couldn't sleep at night if I laughed at." She chuckle once. "*Ah crap*…"

The brazen boy bashed his fists about! Said bashing to his chagrin due to the tubes in his arms. "*Ow*, dammit. Barter shoulda told the doctor to take all these *deplorable* tubes out."

"Is that why you're upset? I'm sure we could find a way to—"

"No! Barter's upset because he wasted his life doing things he was supposed to!"

The nurse let an honest 'ha-ha-ha' slip before she knew it. "Oh-my-gosh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to laugh. It's just, well, the only reason people enjoy doing things they're not supposed to do is because of the things they're supposed to do. At

least, that's why I enjoy them…"

Barter looked at the nurse's pale blue eyes for the first time and saw everything he couldn't see, because he'd been too busy looking at himself. "You remind me of my spirit-brother Opol; he's an infinitely wise monk."

"*Okay*, sure. Thank you?" Was about all she could say to that.

"Barter just realized that he doesn't know your name."

She shrugged it off without thought. "That's okay, I hate my name anyways."

"You hate your name?"

"*Uh*, yeah-kinda, sorry-never-mind, it's Jenny."

"Barter thinks Jenny is a good name."

"It's fine, just not—me…"

"He thought adults could change their names if they wanted?"

Jenny scoffed. "Well-yeah, but…"

"…What?"

"It cost money and takes time."

"But, don't you have both of those?"

Jenny shrugged. "Well-yeah, I'm a nurse; so maybe a little less time than money."

"So why can't you change your name?"

"I don't have a good answer for that…"

"Oh… So what's your new name gonna be?"

The nurse in search of self said, "Fate."

"*Ooh*, Barter thinks that's a kick ass name. Oh-and don't worry about his cussing words, Barter's mom said it was okay."

Fate laughed.

"Well," he held out his hand, "It's good to meet you Fate."

Fate gladly introduced herself for the

first time. "It's a pleasure, Barter."

Fate suddenly remembered where she was and how little it had to do with who she wanted to be elsewhere, a buzzing pager at her side insisting that reality. "Well-crap, *um*, let me go find the doctor to see what he says about these tubes and I'll be back in just a little while to check on you."

"*Okay*," Barter heavily sighed, knowing that meant he'd be alone again.

Fate felt conflicted about the path ahead, feet holding by the doorway. This was because Jenny was the kind who walked away and Fate was the kind who never left without making a mark. "I don't know why, but you reminded me of my brother just now. He was always a little sad, but when I was little we'd all go to Anise Park nearby and he'd push me on the swings with a big smile. And we always knew the best swings were the old crappy ones up on the hill that everyone else ignored, because they had the best view."

He'd paid complete attention to Fate's words, letting the story he might've never known renew his grin. "Swings are Barter's favorite too."

Fate gave a grand smile before leaving with a subtle wave.

Barter's grin was gone with a grump, once again left with but the growling of his stomach. He glared at the damn tubes and griped, "You think they'd put some food in one of these things."

The clock made a mocking stutter of a tick.

"Oh that is *it* clock." His eyes scanned about for something to throw.

The tea was most certainly not an

option and everything else looked like important medical gibberish.

Brave Barter suddenly felt like he were being defeated by an unpleasant hospital room, and maybe a heft of child-like impatience. "Okay, it's been-like over two hours and Barter's family is still gone…but that's okay, they'll be back…yup, *anytime* now…" His attempt at being self-reassuring hadn't felt so assuring. Barter's brow slumped and his gaze sharpened at the uncalibrated 'ka-tick' of the petulant plastic clock. He shifted himself off the side of the bed, wheeling his tubes right along with him. He glared up at the China-made mockery of what was once metal-geared German machinery.

The clock went on telling time, but made no ticking of any kind out of spite.

"Barter's gonna kick your ass clock." He began banging his IV pole against the wall! Honestly believing with each missed bash that the next one would somehow reach the artificial antagonist ticking away the time he'd left.

"What is happening in here?!" Dr. Dashini chirped as he popped inside the room with staff peeking through the door behind him.

"Can you please get Barter that clock?"

Upon seeing there was nothing seriously wrong, the Dr. waved away the nosey nursing staff. "Certainly."

The clock gave an unhappy 'kack' as it was pulled off the wall and handed to its adolescent executioner.

"Thank you." Barter dropped the clock on the floor and pile-drove the IV stand into it again and again and again!

Dr. Dashini, and the looming staff, patiently let the young man mash his way through whatever stupid numbered stage of grief anger was. "Well——"

Barter gave one more sudden and sadistic smash of the decimated décor!

The Dr. gave him a few seconds longer this time, in case he'd another bash left in him. "Well, I see you're feeling a bit more energetic."

"No," Barter growled as he stared at the broken plastic thing that was once something more. "Barter feels like shit."

The doc cleared his throat. "Yes, that is expected. If you get back into bed I can increase your painkillers——"

"No! Sorry, but Barter doesn't want drugs. He wants chicken fried chicken and less tubes…"

Dr. Dashini chuckled. "I'm afraid I can't help with the chicken, but I can help with this mess of tubes." He motioned for the boy to head back towards the bed as he politely said, "Please."

Barter's grump followed him back over to the bed; along with a fair amount of clock guts. He sat up onto the edge of the bed, refusing to go any farther than that.

The Dr. went to work on untangling and reducing the amount of nonsense plugged into the poor child. He removed a few of the unnecessary sensors already set lower than normal for his failing vitals. He carefully removed the near-empty IV from his arm, taping a cotton ball to stop any bleeding. "As a doctor, I often find there is nothing I can do for my patients…"

The grump upon Barter's face softened as he replied, "That doesn't make sense,

doctors heal people."

"Sometimes, yes." He unclipped tubes and arranged them properly.

"Why only sometimes? *Oh*, *right*, sometimes like with Barter…"

Dr. Dashini sat down beside the boy with more inner-strength than most adults. "Not always, it's more like sometimes I'm the one giving people the stuff that makes them sick…"

"Like what stuff?"

He realized he'd said too much. "Forgive me, I misspoke." He stood up for a swift exit. "The medical field is a complex thing. Well, that should make you a bit more comfortable."

"It's the medicine, huh? Barter read all kinds a stuff on the internet about people getting sicker from medicine and how it's all made from chemical company byproducts so they can make money off of it instead of paying money to safely get rid of it."

Dr. Dashini didn't have a damn thing he could deny about that. "Yes, that's pretty much it. But as long as these terrible companies pay for entire hospitals and *medical centers*, the people working inside those places have to do what those companies want."

Barter's final fleck of grump disappeared as he smiled. "No we don't, that's the trick doc."

"What do you mean?"

"After Barter's mom buys him a new toy he owes her only a thank you, because no matter how hard his mom tries he might blow it up in the backyard with a firecracker."

"Are you saying we should blow up the

hospital with firecrackers?" Dr. Dashini wasn't great with metaphors.

Barter was starting to think it easier to become a doctor than he'd presumed all these years. "No, no that is not what he's saying at all. Barter's saying that the only people who own something are the ones who actually use that something and won't let other people take it from them."

Dr. Dashini let his professionalism fall second to the truth he found himself hearing. "I will keep that in mind forever. My mother used to say that there are gifts in this world we shouldn't have to do without; I believe you are one of those gifts she spoke of." He poised and bowed, as if he'd been speaking to a spiritual guru back home, before promptly leaving to take care of a million things.

Barter wasn't sure he'd ever been treated like that before, but he was certain that the lack of tubing dangling from him felt great. He curiously hummed to himself, "I wonder if Barter's the reason why people keep going away? …Crap, he thinks it kinda is, but in a good way…" He laughed at the clock-less wall, because he kinda wished he knew what time it was now. Something bigger beckoned the boy as he hopped back out of bed and pulled his outfit from the drawer. "There's no way Barter's finishing this fight in a butt-drafty hospital dress."

Thankfully, his family wasn't taking this tragedy laying down either.

"No running!" One of the veteran nurses yelled from the nurse's station outside.

Goth Windy's feet skid to halt in the doorway, the girl huffing like she'd ran a marathon.

"Windy!" Barter belted as he beamed with joy.

Windy skipped over to her brother, ignoring the crunching clock crumbles, and dropped to a knee as she grabbed his shoulders. However, she was still too out of breath to blow the words off the tip of her tongue.

"What-what is it?! Where's the rest of Barter's family?!"

Windy smirked and spoke as her breath returned to her. "We need to get you outta this room."

"Barter *literally* loves that idea."

Windy grimaced at the nonsense still hooked up to her brother, but smiled at the wheels on the pole. "I have an idea."

"Okay, but first we gotta cover Barter's butt, ha."

"What?"

"*His butt*."

"*Oh*, ha."



Windy's idea had been quick and efficient, to the displeasure of the nurse in charge. "What in the Hell!?" Was all she managed to get out before they flashed by.

"*Sorry!*" Goth Windy gleefully shouted as she speed-charioted her brother upon his own IV stand!

Barter happily howled, "Onward!" His jacket flailed off the tube-stricken side of his body like a flag.

Windy kept herself hugged around her weakened brother as they barreled down the hallway, the two whooping and hollering as

though they'd lost their minds to the whimsy and wonder we've all been guilty of forgetting. They nearly fell over as Windy stopped a little too quickly, drifting a strained stop in front of the cafeteria entrance.

Barter's jaw dropped when he saw the rest of his family backed by a plethora of others, but it was the ice cream buffet, mountain of candy on a table, and delivery diner nearby that did the majority of the jaw dropping.

Daria gave Windy a look that said there was probably a better way of doing that; in other words, hospitals have wheelchairs.

Daring Dusky boldly said, "We did it!" Though his announcement short, it got the point across.

Barter awed at what his family had done in such short time, his mouth already watering for the big bin of chicken fried chicken and piles of approved sides. He suddenly realized that all the years of scheduled schooling and weekly work woes had done nothing more than mask the amazing that people like his family were. With not a word in a dictionary great enough to describe the people in his life, he simply shouted, "Let's eat!"

And so the feast began with a flurry of cheers and claps. Before the hungry boy knew it, there was a small roasting pan filled with bananas and ice cream in his face, and a heaping plate of smothered chicken fried chicken. Soon the word spread throughout the hospital and the late-shifters found themselves enjoying the same soul-lifting food during the bitter hours of the morning. And no, not a damn one of them gave a crap

about how many hospital rules they were breaking.



Barter had more food left than he could ever finish, but he'd enjoyed every savory and sweet bite. He soon realized that the many people who'd been there when he got there hadn't even so much as introduced themselves. He'd quickly figured it was because of the terrible Titty-Sacks disease that he purposefully said wrong to belittle its power. However, respectfully silent just wasn't how Barter rolled. "Opol, Barter needs your help."

The monk swallowed his vanilla gelato bite first. "With what?"

"He needs help going around and talking to people like a spiritual leader person."

"*Oh-Barter*," his mother droned, "Just relax and—eat some more."

His father laughed as he stole a bite of his son's massive banana split, while Windy stole a spoon of his smothered mashed potatoes.

Brave Barter lifted that all too familiar chin of his as he used his power of speaking from the heart. "Sorry mom, but he has to be himself. Barter's gotta do what Barter's gotta do."

Everyone waited for Daria. She said the two most important words a parent can ever say to their child. "I understand." She removed the cape she was wearing as a scarf. "You'll need this." Daria gave a proud sigh as she tied it back onto her little hero.

Opol happily speared his spoon into the frozen desert. "I will do my best as your

advocate."

Barter shook his head. "Barter needs a big brother for this mission."

Opol's approval of that stretched from ear to ear. "It would be my honor."

Goth Windy wanted to selfishly urge him to stay with them, but she knew better. "Hurry back lil bro, okay? If I start missing you I'm gonna come kick your butt."

"Barter reads you loud and clear sis."

Opol gave his brother a hand up as he saw his uncharacteristically slothful movements.

Barter made his way right for the nearby brunette with her face in her phone and an untouched bowl of melting strawberry ice cream. "Excuse me?"

"Huh?" Destiny looked up and smiled at the both of them.

Opol smiled and waved back at his ice cream truck ally.

Phone still in hand and in her peripherals, Destiny said, "Hey Opol. This must be your ice cream loving friend."

"Nope," Barter promptly refuted, "Opol's Barter's big brother."

Destiny gladly sat her phone down for the larger than life kid with a cape. "Oh I *see, my apologies*. So, you're that crazy kid shit-talkin the Mayor I voted for on the news, aren't you?"

Opol whispered in warning, "Destiny can be a bit blatant."

"Yup, I'm Barter, and I know just how to change *your* life."

Destiny managed to look pessimistic and confused at the same time.

Opol offered a little advice. "When attempting to be a spiritual leader, one

might want to avoid sounding like a car salesmen…"

Destiny covered her mouth and snorted her laughter into her hand.

Barter grimaced a little as he apologized to Destiny. "Sorry, Barter's not so good at this kinda stuff."

Opol was a brotherly compendium of helpful comments. "And yet you have already done it so very well *many* a times…"

"Alright," Destiny eagerly chirped, "I'm into it. Bring on the spiritual. I'm ready for it. Whatcha got?"

Up until that very moment, Barter had always acted with thoughtless honesty, but this time he saw how it worked and how he worked and how connected it all was to everything and everyone; this was literally Barter's born talent. A revelation that stirred him to the core as much as it filled him with vigor. "You seek meaning and validation to the point where you push others away, because you have yet to feel like you've ever truly mattered to anyone or anything you've ever done."

Destiny shared the same shock as an infinitely wise monk. The words were stolen from her mouth for a moment. Destiny hoarsely hummed, "That-uh, eh-*um*, that's-uh, that's pretty good…"

Unlike most who hold a greater understanding in this world, Barter stayed true to his name and offered only fair trades for the truth. "Barter knows even more, but he will only tell you if you want him to. Do you want him to?"

Destiny nervously gripped the supposed device of smartness. She'd no idea what to expect, but Destiny rarely turned a chin to

possibility. "Um-yeah, sure. I mean, yes please."

Barter smiled and nodded. "Your ice cream is melting."

It took Destiny a second to realize the boy was being literal. "Oh-right." She stuck a spoonful in her mouth and couldn't help the after-effect 'mmm' that occurred. And so she slowly ate, taking each bite the same as she took his words; mindfully.

"Barter knows that the thing you want so bad you most likely already have. You simply have to sacrifice something for the sake of its existence, like letting go of a comfort for a bite of ice cream…"

Destiny hadn't even realized she'd let go of her rectangle vice to pull the bowl closer. The information he was dishing out went perfect with the smooth tart of strawberries and cream, letting her palate open to the bright flavor of realization.

"Barter would like to put it simply for you, because he thinks *philosophy* is confusing. So here it is, get rid of everything keeping you from being a part of the real world around you. Oh, and get a phone that only makes phone calls, because salesmen saying that something they made is smart is only true for the salesmen selling it."

Destiny took another heap of ice cream before putting the spoon down. Her ears rang in resistance as she knew exactly what to do. "Here," she said as she tossed Opol her phone. "Consider it a present from a friend."

Opol took a second to figure out which way was right side up. "Thank you, I have never owned one of these before."

Destiny replied, "I suggest you play with it for a day and then throw it away."

"Understood," Opol chortled at his new friend.

Barter had one last quick query. "What will you do now?"

Destiny looked around for something that might match her name. "Well hello there unusually attractive male nurse, let's find out if you're straight enough for this quiver." She hopped up and beeline for the unsuspecting young man of indeterminate sexual orientation.

Neither Barter nor Opol were sure they wanted to understand that metaphor.

Opol burst into laughter. "Barter, you are a natural born guru."

"Oh, really? That's neat I guess."

The monk proudly said the same words he'd proudly said what seemed like a lifetime ago. "Lead the way my brother, I will be at your back always."

Barter beamed with new life as he realized he'd changed Destiny's mind, because just saying that in his head sounded so damn cool. Like any good-hearted warrior of truth, he snuck a bite of Destiny's ice cream before scanning the nearby tables for the fork in the road of forks he needed to take. And Barter found it, because he was himself for the sake of others.

The odd couple cruised between tables, mixing words with the benevolent ease of Gandhi and crucially content Buddha-bellies. They spoke of unspoken matters and unraveled the truths we all fail to see within our own reflections. Bringing the peace of humility to a high-stung ice cream vendor with the simple idea of setting up at a local

orphanage or just allowing an old couple to accept the joy they still had to offer a world of children. Their path through the people was far from a straight line or a simply spoken task, but an occasional cameo from a sugar-fueled Fate kept them true to their truths.

Soon ice cream was being toted back to rooms; patients stuck in their clock-walled cubicles partook in something real and un-televised. For true healing isn't sold in small pills or found at the end of an insurance form, it's in the small profitless acts of caring and found at the end of all-natural understanding.



Only leftover lined trays remained as the ice cream had all but been evacuated before its melty end. The bustling cafeteria crowd thinning, the hospital staff running off to ready for the encroaching morning-shifters. Many moving on with their days, having much more than full bellies; they moved towards their futures with self-understanding filling a much harder to fill void than a belly. All per the brave of a boy named Barter and the always under-sold support of an accepting family.

However, a vigilant Dr. Dashini sat in silence…

The time had ebbed by after Barter's envoy of enlightenment had come back home to his family's table. All of them sharing words and laughs as though they were going out of style.

Barter grinned at the dark-orange dim narrowly inching up the horizon. The breath

he took was deep and difficult. That single breath told him more than any practitioner of medicine ever could. He'd taken care of so many in such a short time and wished to do more, but now he it was time for him to take care of himself.

Windy worrisomely hummed, "Barter? Are you okay? You got real quiet."

"Barter's gonna be okay, he was just thinking…"

Daria could see the serious in Barter's eyes and feared asking, but for him she'd step past any fear. "What were you thinking?"

He smiled wide at all of their adoring faces. "Barter was thinking he'd really like to go to the park and swing."

Dusky pat his son on the shoulder. "That sounds great buddy, but it might be hard to do with all this medical crap."

"Barter knows, that's why he needs to get it all removed."

His family's glowing faces grew somber before the idea.

The ever-vigilant attending Dr. Dashini sprung from the sidelines without warning. "Forgive my interruption, but I cannot recommend enough that you keep those lines in…"

"Why?" Barter didn't hesitate to ask before also asking, "And why has the doctor been *looming* around him for hours?"

Dr. Dashini guiltily cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude. I just wanted to be—I just wanted to do my job for someone that deserves it…"

Barter's face humbled. "Please doc, tell Barter how things are like he weren't a kid."

Dr. Dashini froze for a moment, unsure he even knew exactly how to do that.

Goth Windy was right on board with that truth train, long since sick of her own selfish fears of discomfort. "You heard my lil bro, tell us straight doc."

"Okay," the doctor anxiously choked. "Uh-em, I personally am amazed by you Barter. It's as if you are simply ignoring all the awful things that come with this, because I have no idea how you're still a—with us…"

Dusky proudly said, "Barter's tough."

Daria lovingly added, "Barter's double tough."

Windy confirmed and exacerbated, "Triple tough, with a bit O' brilliant-badass for good measure."

Barter gave a big nod. "You heard em doc"—he stuck his tubed arm out—"Get this shit outta me so I can go play in the park."

Dr. Dashini dawned only reluctance. "Again, you cannot take those out, many of them are using drugs to keep your organs going and the pain down."

"Barter's very sorry doc, but there's nothing else besides this you can do to help him…"

Opol spoke from the worry in his heart, because infinite wisdom took too long. "Please, Barter, if the doctor removes those you might…please? We can find a different way."

"*Yeah*," Windy added with a hint of sob. "And he's a super-wise monk and *extra* old so you know he's right."

Opol would've been more annoyed by being called extra old, but he'd better worries at the moment.

"Barter's very sorry everyone, but he can feel it coming back and tubes aren't gonna matter anymore…" He could feel his arms waning against their own weight as he took an uplifting nipper of whipped cream.

The doctor did his job as he inquired, "What are you feeling?"

He raised an expressive eyebrow to everyone. "Barter's feeling like no one's listening to him…"

Infinite wisdom be damned, Opol explained. "We are all just scared, and need you to tell us exactly what you are thinking and why."

For any boy, especially an autistic extrovert with a natural talent for mindfulness, doing this was nearly impossible. "Barter doesn't know how to explain it, because it's like being able to do a magic trick and if he tells you how than it's not a magic trick anymore."

His family gave a failing, humbled laugh in unison to that.

Windy informed, "You just kinda did."

"Did what? Magic tricks? Actually, it's like invisible feelings that let him pull truth-rabbits out of people's lives, but not magic rabbits…wait, what did Barter do again?" Barter asked with genuine confusion, accidentally disproving that an attention span is needed to be brilliant.

Daria lovingly sighed at her son. "You explained it silly, and then you explained it some more."

"Oh… okay-then. Can Barter go to the park now?"

His family all grinned and nodded, knowing there was not a damn thing they'd tell him no to right now.

Barter held his arm out to Dr. Dashini. "Can you please help me with this doc?"

The 1st thing the doctor knew was that legally he very much couldn't help, but the 2nd thing he knew was that legally is best left to lawyers and liars. He grabbed a nearby med-kit off the wall and hunted down the cotton balls in it. "I can't directly do that or order a nurse to, but it's very simple and I can walk one of you through it quite easily."

Opol saw the grin on the doctor's face arise before he saw the fingers upon their noses; even Barter had opted out. "I see, it appears I have drawn the proverbial short straw of some kind. Unless all of you have an itchy nose at the same time?"

They shook their heads, fingers still upon noses.

Opol sighed. "I thought not."

The Dr. walked the monk through the simple removal of tape, cotton ball finger-pressing, and single swatches of new tape.

Everyone, including Opol, nodded in approval of his handiwork.

Dr. Dashini didn't waste words as he dished out the dangers of what was happening. "It could be minutes or hours before the current drugs in your system work their way out, but you could experience great pain or other disabling feelings at some point."

Barter stood strong and took a deep breath. He shook the hand of Dr. Dashini with vigor. "Thanks doc. Barter suggests you go and help someone else, because you're good at it. Don't doubt yourself anymore, and research some holst-hull-hill…*holistic* medicine."

Dr. Dashini could but say, "Thank you."

Brave Barter tossed his once tubed arm through his jacket and acted the leader he was. "Come on Barter's family, let's go to the park." It was a gallant stroll into the hallway, but Barter was glad to once again see Fate's smiling face and gladder yet to see the fresh wheelchair in her hands.

Fate's cameo came and went with ease. "Dunno why, but I found this wheelchair and realized you didn't have one when I saw you-and brought it to you instead of checking on the mean old man I'm supposed to be watching-and *aw* crap, that's my pager."

Barter bellowed at Fate's back, "Please be nice to that old man! For Barter!"

And with a fading thumbs up, Fate was gone, leaving a simple pleather and steel steed for the righteous young warrior.

Barter plopped his butt into the chair with a huff. "Not to be a downer awesome family, but we might wanna take this journey at Goth Windy speed…"

The family could see the slump in his demeanor and took Barter-style charge.

Dusky handed Barter his bowl of rocky road ice cream and did the seatbelt on the wheelchair for him.

Daria directed traffic. "Windella's behind the wheel then. Opol?"

"Yes?"

"I need you to clear the way ahead."

Opol acquiesce as the faithful ally he was. "Consider it done."

"You're with me Dusky." Daria started their stampede with a fitting, "Charge!"

Thanks to Destiny, Opol knew the way. He cleared ahead with quick and kind words and gestures.

Meanwhile, Daria and Dusky did flash-mob-like damage control with disgruntled and shocked hospital staff.

It wasn't long before they burst out the front of the hospital with a brazenly thrilled Barter shouting like he were on a rollercoaster. Their thrill hit a shrill end as they stopped in front of the pick-up area, the overlooked reality that they'd no car crippling the group's gusto. Everyone's growing grimaces turned to the left.

A familiar red truck purred up to them with a couple familiar friendly smiles.

Hanna shrilly chirped, "You folks look like ya need a ride!"

The group's grimaces got overgrown by appreciative grins.

Harold happily barked, "Well go on! Get yer butts in the back already!"

The family flurried over the back of the truck, Dusky dropping the tailgate as they hoisted a re-exuberated Barter up into the back. Everyone piled in around him, hillbilly style.

Harold loudly asked, "Where to, Barter-family!?"

Windy leaned off the driver side and hummed at Harold, "*Anise Park please*. And we're kinda in a hurry, any chance we can ignore the speed limit a little-maybe?"

Harold looked in the mirror at the leaning young woman as respectfully as an old man with good eyes could. "Oh-um… Well, anything for a lovely gal like yerself."

Hanna harped, "Who's a lovely gal?!"

Harold cleared his throat and put his eyes on the road. "Not now dear, I'm drivin. Hold tight everyone!" He sped off before his wife could kick his ass.

Their thrilled shouts carried through the barely waking streets of Coriander, a dozen or so traffic cameras having picture proof of that.

It wasn't but a few seconds after Harold parked in the empty park parking lot before a police car pulled up with a 'badeep' under a swift hail of red and blue flashes.

Everyone froze in place as the officer hopped out and confronted them. "What in the Hell is happening here?!" The big blond officer squawked, having been startled awake from his duty of drifting off.

"Oh-go blow it out yer butt pig." Harold did not help the situation.

"*Excuse me!?*"

Thankfully for Barter and his family, the only superpower they needed in that moment was Hanna's mouth.

"He's got the kinda dementia that makes him an ass," Hanna quickly explained. "Just listen. This is that there kid from the news and his family and they gotta do something important right now and can't be bothered by yer big beautiful butt."

Harold harked, "Who's beautiful butt?!"

Hanna brushed him off. "Not now dear, I'm talkin to the officer."

Blond or not, the officer could put two and one cape together. "Hey, you *are* that kid from the news."

His family hoisted him off the back of the truck. "Barter doesn't mean to be rude Mr. Officer, but he's got something very important to do."

The officer had to ask, "What-uh, what important thing? Like a press conference?"

"Barter's gotta go swing."

The officer was utterly baffled, but thankfully his new workplace fling had recently taught him that simple faith in another human being can move mountains; or at the very least let a child be who he is. "Yeah-okay, sure. I-uh, I used ta love swinging."

Being the ever-selfless person he was, Barter asked, "Would you like to come with him and swing too?"

The Coriander cop wasn't a complex character even to his own life; he was a man that appreciated the simple things and remained fastidious unto the rules set before us all. However, he was learning to love a little different and break a little rules. "Well I should probably go do my job, ya'll just *slow down*? …Nope, no, I gotta know what the heck's goin on here. What's the kid from the news doin in a park at the butt-crack O' dawn, in a wheelchair, and speedin through my streets like meth-head teenagers?!"

"Barter's dying." The young man did not waste words, as real fate was far too punctual to test.

The officer looked around at their faces, each one painted with the same stony pain. He then looked down at Barter's cotton ball dotted arms; his own instincts sunk his heart into his stomach. "No," he automatically chirped in refute, "Yer just a kid…"

Dusky bravely droned, "It's true."

Daria followed him. "So please, let us go."

Barter gave an exhausted huff and smiled as his inhale brought his eyes to the officer's embroidered last name. "Barter

really wants to play on the swings, Mr. Chance."

Officer Chance humbly hummed, "Yeah-of course"—he gestured them on—"The-uh, the best swings are the old ones up on the hill…"

"So I've heard." Barter handed him his dad's bowl of ice cream and Windy wheeled him away.

A Windy in motion asked the stationary old couple, "Aren't you coming with us?"

"Sorry dears," Hanna apologized, "But we've got a store to run."

Harold respectfully choked, "It was, em, it was an honor meeting all of you. Especially you, Barter."

The couple waved goodbye, but not because of the store they would escape to. It was because neither of their hearts could survive what the rest of his family would have to.

As they jogged down the park paths with Barter's belligerent enthuse, Officer Chance sat down in his car and waited to ensure no one else would bother the family; at least he had ice cream. He did this because that was the most helpful thing he could think of.

Their twisting path through the park took them right towards the large playground in the middle.

But Barter's big eyes caught sight of the real prize hidden behind bushes and brambles. "There! Over there!" He shouted and pointed.

Not a one of them questioned veering towards the rough and uneven set of log stairs, but getting a wheelchair up them posed a problem.

"Stop," Barter said as the wheels bumped against the 1st step. He unbuckled and sat a single foot out onto that step, while his family all audibly chagrin. "Barter's got this…" He wasn't convinced until he stood from the chair, than he was less convinced.

His mother took one side and his father took the other, straightening the wobbly-legged boy.

Barter looked up at his smiling parents as the ambient words of Opol rang true in the moment.

"Together is always better than alone."

Barter huffed, "Together it is. Barter can walk this mountain."

And together the three of them made their way up the stairs.

Opol took a fearfully shivering Windy's hand and helped her too walk the short yet difficult path ahead.

Barter felt his breath with each step, bartering with his lungs for more as the fresh morning air beckoned to be breathed. His body began to ache, but his will to get where he was meant to be ached far more.

Upon the weedy and hard, dusted land past the top step sat the old swing-set. It was but 2 swings of stainless steel chain and seats of solid rubber. Its frame of literal logs sat as sturdy as the trees they'd come from.

Barter smiled wide at the motley thing. He let the cool breeze cutting across the top empower his strained breath and ease his all-around aching.

They made their way to the swing as the glow of the rising sun remained dim by a shading rainstorm upon the distant horizon.

Barter lunged against the swing and started chuckling in amusement as he hung off of it. "Barter's too tired to swing…"

Daria scooped her son up with ease and sat in the swing with him on her lap. "Remember when you were little and we used to swing like this?" She began gently swinging with her legs.

Barter nestled in with a relaxing sigh as he smiled at the thought. "He does remember… Barter thinks a part of him always remembers everything… Higher please?"

Daria gave a good kick or two and the swing grabbed their weight as its hinges sang with somber squeaks and squeals.

Each and every one of Barter's breaths felt oh-so meaningful, opening his senses to everything he took for granted. "Barter can hear music…"

Daria breathed deep as she held her son close. "There's no music honey, just your family."

Dusky gasped as it hit his hearing. "No-wait, there is music, listen…"

They all let their ears calm to the acoustic whisper wandering up the hillside from a cold stone bench. Upon that bench sat a man in black who plucked at a six string. This man never knew who heard his songs nor asked any for requests, he simply played what he felt and wanted for nothing more than some change and crumpled bills. As always, the man in black played from sunrise to sunset. But today, the sun was late and the sound of a squeaking swing somewhere awoke the melody within him.

Grins graced faces as a louder classical hymn rung with modern strums, as if being played for them.

Dusky let the sound fill his heart as he reiterated the distance dulled lyrics. "I've got some friends that I hardly know, but we've had some times I wouldn't trade for the world."

Barter could hear the chorus as he sang along with his father. "Swing life away…"

Dusky chuckled.

Windy giggled, "I love that song."

Opol let the new melody memorize like a lengthily savored dish.

Their heads all turned and rose as a persimmon ray of sunrise cut across the hilltop, coating them in the needed warmth of a new day.

"Barter did it," he happily huffed as the storm on the horizon turned cobalt and gold.

Daria kept on swinging as she asked, "Did what sweetie?"

"He got to live a meaningful life, like grandpa didn't. Barter…he…he's so happy you're his family. Barter just wishes… I just wish I got to live more of it with you…"

"Shh," Daria lovingly hushed. "It's okay honey, we're all here with you and we love you." Her swinging legs gently skid to a halt. "Barter? …Honey?"

Dusky reached for his boy and stopped. But a glance into the emptiness of his son's creamed-coffee eyes, and Dusky fell to his knees.

Windy's hands fell over her terrified gasp as Opol's head simply fell.

"Barter?" Daria sobbed on. "Sweetie? Barter? Wake up honey? Barter?"

Dusky gently grabbed Daria's arm, unable to look up from the ground and his

falling tears. "He's gone…"

"No," Daria sobbed with a bit more ferocity. "He's just taking a nap. Come on Barter, wake up. Show everyone you're okay… Barter?"

Windy turned away and fell to her knees as well.

Like a sorrowful statue ever-gazing at the dirt, Opol woefully said, "I am so sorry. I feel he has left us…"

"You're wrong!" Daria yelled with a crackle in her tone. "Show em Barter? Butter-Bum?" Daria tilted her son's limp head back and finally looked into the void of his once vibrant eyes. "No…"—pain poured from her visage before the sounds of torment followed—"AHHH! Hrrr…AHHHHHHHHH!" Reality struck her with agony as her wails tore the warmth from the persimmon sun.

Even the man in black lowered his guitar for the mother's song of sorrow.

And so the day began with ending of something truly divine. Not a god nor a messiah, but a an 8 year old boy wanting for days that're different than the oh-so many days others have decided for us.

epilogue

There should be no Fun in Funeral

For days the Davidson house had been doused in depression, most of them still finding themselves crying alone in corners. A monk's cooking the only thing keeping them from becoming zombies. And today would by far be the worst day they'd had since that day at the park…

Daria walked in the door from her jog/walk to the donut shop that she started doing to relieve stress; the donuts helped more than the jogging/walking, but at least the melancholy sweat-clothes matched her attitude. She walked into the living room to the sight of a nicely dressed Goth Windy amidst a full meltdown.

Her face lined with tears and smeared makeup, Windy lifted the game controller in her hand and squalled, "I was playing-cause I miss him-but I suck-and he didn't-and I think I *broke it*…"

Daria sighed as she calmly poked the start button. "You had it paused."

Windy gave a wet snort or two. "Oh, whoops. Guess I overreacted…"

Daria tossed the controller aside and handed her daughter a needed bag of custard filled donuts. She plopped down beside her on the couch. "Video games are stupid."

Windy laughed. "*Soooo* stupid. What is wrong with guys? Buncha sadists running around killin stuff over and over again."

Daria popped the bag and stuffed donut in her face. "I'm so not ready for this…"

Windy anxiously attacked the donuts too. "Me either, and I screwed up my makeup already."

Daria felt the need to ask, "Why'd you get ready so early?"

Windy sniffled and sobbed. "I dunno, I thought looking nice would make me feel better…" It hadn't, but her mother's ensuing hug was starting to.

Daria squeezed her daughter tight. "Oh Windella, it'll be okay—"

"When?!" Windy snapped a little as she pulled away.

"A friend recently told me that it'll stop hurting longer down the road than we want, but at the exact time it needs to happen."

"You sound like Opol."

"I will be taking that as a compliment." Opol appeared with a tray of green biscuits as he sat down a pot of fresh tea. "And these are much healthier than those."

Windy grabbed one and started eating it with her donut atop it like an edible plate. "They are good."

Opol sighed in defeat as Daria did the same.

Daria mom the monk a little. "Oh-stop sighing and have a donut already."

Opol took the sticky treat Windy was waving at him. "Mm… It tastes like a pile of sugar…" He put one of the green biscuits under his donut too, took a bite, and shrugged. "Well, the sugar does do a good job of masking the earthy taste of the ashwagandha root."

They took a silent moment of munching and tea sipping.

Opol asked, "Where is Dusky?"

Their faces said that they both knew exactly where he was; the same place they'd had to pry him from yesterday.

"I see, he is in the hallway again…" Opol grabbed a fresh donut and plopped it atop a green biscuit. "I will go speak with him. Be sure to drink more tea. It is the last of the special mix I brought from the monastery, and it will aid in the cleansing of all that sugar and negative energy."

Daria and Windy teasingly droned, "*Yes dad*."

Opol grinned at their light-hearted jesting as he walked away.

As expected, Dusky was standing in the hallway, staring at Barter's closed door. He was the same ultra-disheveled mess of hippy he'd been for days.

"I brought you something to eat, and you are going to set off the smoke alarm again."

Dusky gave the green biscuit topped with donut a worrisome glance. He took a small dooby puff, before snuffing it out and sticking it in his pocket as to not upset Daria. Dusky grumbled, "I ripped the batteries out of all of them days ago anyways…"

"You should eat something."

Dusky grumbled, "What the heck are you trying to feed me man?"

"It is all made from seaweed."

"What?!" Dusky croaked as he turned around, the monk having managed to get his attention.

Opol had a big guilty grin. "Kidding,

it is a donut made of sugar and a heart-healthy green biscuit I made."

Dusky's expression softened ever-so-slightly. "Thank you," he said as he took the food. "I didn't know you joked."

"It is new."

"I like it." The monotone Dusky took a bite of his breakfast and mumbled, "I like this too." He took a few more bites, because everybody loves a little something sweet. "I should've done more for him…"

"Me too," Daria unsuspectingly said from around the corner. "I should've done so much more for him, but we're always gonna feel that way."

"She's right," an equally snooping Windy added. "We just need to let ourselves feel like that, because-of-course we'd want to do something more for him"—the tears and sobbing broke free of her restraint—"Because we love him so much…"

Daria pulled Windy close.

Dusky stared at that damn door.

Opol's current infinite wisdom was simple. "I believe Barter would say that feeling bad is good because it means you care a whole lot."

They all broke a smile and a tear-lined laugh for that spot on note.

A single moment together with them reminded Dusky who he was. So he spoke his truth with a stern tone. "I've been standing here like this because—because I don't wanna believe that when I open that door he won't be there…"

Opol placed a palm upon Dusky's shoulder. "Honor Barter's memory today and confront your fear."

Dusky absolutely hated the idea of

doing that, and that's how he knew it was the right thing to do. He stepped to his son's door that'd been closed since the day they'd stormed Coriander City Hall. Dusky slowly wrapped his hand around the cold door handle, but he couldn't turn it.

Daria gently put her hand over his and helped him turn that knob. "It'll be okay."

The mother and father both softly gasped in sorrow when they saw their son wasn't on the other side.

Windy popped her head between the two of them. "What's that?"

Even Opol peeked as they all stared at the envelope in the middle of Barter's messy bed. Upon the white envelope was written one word; family.

Dusky dove for the envelope, lifting it up into his hands like a fragile baby bird. He sat upon the bed as he realized he'd found a part of his son after all.

"Well?!" Windy impatiently quacked. "What's in it?!"

Daria sat down beside the shell-shocked Dusky and gently lifted the letter from his palms. Her hands tremored a little as she opened the yet to be sealed top and looked inside as though there'd be anything other than more paper inside.

Everyone was now looming over the letter.

Dusky and Daria locked reddening eyes as both of them had the same feeling; that they wanted to put the envelope back down and leave it there safe and sound forever. The father and mother of the once magnificent young man knew better than to let his words go unheard. So they both turned to Opol for the strength to do what

they could not, Daria handing him the letter.

Opol accepted the honor with a somber silence. He carefully pulled the colorful crayon-written pages from inside and read:

Barter is writing this fancy letter to his family because he is scared. Even with Awesome Opol making amazing organical monk teas and treats the bad feeling colors are getting worse. And it getting hard to sleep at night. Barter feels lucky Opol is there with tea every time he cannot sleep.

With sadness sitting in their eyes, they all beamed love and admiration at Opol.

Barter knows something bad might be happening to him but he dont care. He wont stop until he finish what he started. Barter loves all of you astronomically and he even loves you more then dictionary words.

P.S.~ There is lots money in my air vent. It was grandpas and he gave it to me and its how I did so much good things. I know you will do even better things with it family.

Daria, Dusky, and Windy made eye contact with one another's curious expressions, but Opol read on before said curiosity could be satiated.

P.S.S.~ Barters not sure this note is good enough for his amazing family. If you get this one and not the cooler one Barter's gonna write he just wants you all to know that he wishes he could of done more for all of you.

Opol's breath humbly left his mouth with those last words as the rest of the family did the same, everyone taking several solemn seconds of reflection.

Dusky broke the silence with a simple

statement. "He felt just like we do now."

They all shared a little chuckle; humbled that Barter cared far more than they knew or understood.

"Wait!" Daria abruptly croaked. "What money?!"

Windy followed that with, "What vent?!"

Dusky joined the girls in glancing about the room's ceilings and floors.

Opol guiltily lowered his head as he stepped aside and pointed to the vent. "Forgive me, I was told of the vent and money by Barter. He said that telling his family about it would not be helpful until later, and I trusted him."

Windy smirked as she instantly recalled Barter popping out of that vent. "*Secret adventure*," she happily whispered to herself as though her little brother had gotten one last prank past her.

Daria had to get some clarification for the sake of her own sanity. "So you're telling me that gross floor vent over there has a buncha money in it?"

"Yes."

Daria stomped over to the vent with the others right behind her. She pulled the loosened cover off with ease and a grimace. Daria kneeled down, looked inside, and grabbed the purposeful length of string with a loop on it.

Everyone watched as she slowly drug the tied-up basketball of old flannel shirt from inside. Not a one of them feeling any less like a character in a Scooby-Doo cartoon; even Opol, who knew about the damn thing and somehow Scooby-Doo.

Daria slowly untied the shoe-knot on top and unfolded the flannel.

Gasps were had all around as the literal pile of cash inside slumped the shirt open ahead of Daria's shocked hands.

Dusky's response was poignant. "Holy fucking shit-that's a lotta moola…"

Windy squawked, "That cheeky old pervert was loaded!"

"*Hey*," Dusky whined in offense.

"Sorry."

Dusky shrugged. "That's okay, he was a cheeky old pervert."

Daria suddenly burst into laughter, keeling over and plopping to her butt on the floor. Her face grew red as she heaved and huffed with amusement, like a drunk at a good stand-up comedy show.

Smiles were forced about the other's confused faces.

"Sorry," Daria croaked as she remembered how to breathe. "I just can't believe that old jerk made me buy him everything. Ha! Now I know why! HAHAHAHA!"

Dusky crossed his arms. "That jerk was my dad…"

Daria chirped at him, "Oh give it a rest. That guy was the worst and everyone knows it."

Dusky opened his mouth to defend his dad, but such memories as his father leaving on the stoop of an orphanage and then driving to the store across the street to get cigarettes had stopped that defense. He could but sigh and nod in agreement.

Windy told a tale that now made her smile. "You know I caught that man peeking through the crack in the bathroom door at me a couple times."

Daria burst into laughter with a resounding 'BWAH-HAHAHAHAH' as Dusky dropped

his forehead into his palm with some huffs of humility, Windy snort-giggled, and Opol chortled with restraint.

Windy sat down with her mom and poked at the pile of money with a nearby plastic sword. "I vote we decide what to do with this money together."

Dusky sat down with them. "I think that would make Barter happy."

Daria's incessant laughter eased into a calmness. "I couldn't agree more."

Opol looked at the small, yet huge in heart, family standing *together* with one another in the kind of times that *separate* us all. He felt there no better time to tell them. "After the funeral today I will be leaving."

Daria lovingly droned, "Oh don't you start with that crap. You're a member of this family, deal with it."

Opol sat down with them, receiving a gentle pat or loving handshake from each member of his informal-adoptive family. "I am truly honored by that, I can assure you all. However, my belief beckons me to travel the world in search of a child who is reincarnated from Barter."

Windy matter-of-factly said, "That's *kinda* too badass of a reason to argue against."

Dusky nodded.

"*Well*," Daria teasingly huffed in protest, "I *suppose* it's okay, but you'd better tell us the moment you find him, and tell him he's grounded for not saying goodbye, and you'd better visit us again anyways."

Opol happily agreed to those wonderful terms. "You have my word, it will be done."

"Well then," Daria hummed as she let the tears reaching for her eyes stay unfallen. "It looks like some of us need to get ready, and stop smoking pot inside my—I mean, our house Dusky."

He'd never been happier to say, "Sorry."

The joy of their shared chuckling arose them to the awful task at hand, because there was no way to look good enough for something that makes you dour in spirit and expression. They 1st made Barter proud and shoved a shirt full of money back into a grimy vent.



Other than their sorrowful silence, they left the house lacking stereotype.

Dusky dawning his jacket of protest instead of the black one that went with his pants.

Daria wore her blue flower upon a simple old green dress that her and Barter ruined with paints one rainy day years ago.

And Windy in a wavy white dress complete with her, wisely waterproof, purple and black makeup paired to her black boots and gloves.

Opol's outfit had not changed, for monks aren't prone to wardrobe changes. However, they are fastidious with their laundry.

Thanks to a local mechanic with an affinity for socialism and politician belittling, Dusky's van was up and running after a handful of pro-bono fixes.

A few lingering flunky reporters kept their distances as they stealthily snapped

pics, but the family couldn't have cared less.

A short bald man with an ugly brown bag bumbled up to the family. "Excuse me, I—"

Windy stuck a silencing hand in the man's face. "Not today creeper. Just turn around and walk away."

The pre-flustered man stammered, "Um-b-but I-I you, I mean—"

Goth Windy gave a mercifully grave glare as she growled, "Last warning creeper, next one's gonna be me punching you so hard you swallow your tongue…"

The meek man fearfully dropped his bag and slapped both hands over his mouth.

A stone-cold Windy raised her chin and gave a nose flick. "That's what I thought."

"Windy?" Daria called. "Stop threatening that stalker and get in the van."

Windella whipped around and leapt into the vehicle.

The man uncovered his mouth as he watched them drive off. His dark-eyed pug-face angrily soured as he grabbed his bag and jangled car keys from his pocket. "Oh this isn't over yet…"



As events go, funerals are about as complicated as a child's birthday party. Television does a wonderful job of making them look like elegant trips to the park, but that's because lies always look great on the surface. In reality it's just a buncha sad people and people who feel obligated to be sad. All sitting in a sad room talking about sad things and eating sad hors

d'oeuvres and drinking alcoholic anything to avoid said sad. But for the funeral of a boy like Barter there was one big difference, everyone in Coriander was trying to show up; right reason or not.

The man in charge of the precession tapped a flustered foot as he flared his hairy nostrils. He brushed back his already combed, graying-coal hair as he took a breath and gathered his thoughts. With his assistants holding the doors and the masses at bay from the other side, he knew he'd no choice but to tell the family what was happening. His slacks swish and his dress shoes clacked into the viewing room full of empty chairs.

The family stood around the closed, macabrely kid-sized casket as misery flowed from their expressions. Not one of them having the strength of heart yet to open the top.

"Forgive me," the flustered man in charge politely interrupted.

Daria swiftly swiped in and said, "Did you do everything like we wanted for Barter?"

"Yes ma'am. Nothing artificial or inorganic was used to preserve your son's body and he was placed in the outfit that you personally brought me, but——"

Daria nit-picked, "What about his cape?"

"It was folded up and placed upon his chest as you requested. But there is a situation developing that requires some serious attention…"

Opol promptly pointed-out, "But Mr. Martin, the funeral has not even begun yet."

Mr. Martin nervously 'ha' and cleared

his throat. "Yes, that is true, but I'm afraid the current amount of people waiting outside greatly exceeds the originally assumed attendance…and a few fire safety codes."

The family glanced at one another, then zipped up front to find out for themselves.

The assistant guarding the inside of the doors nervously smiled at the family.

Windy 'whooshed' to a nearby window. "*Wow*… That is *a lot* of people…"

Daria jested, "It can't be that many."

Windy scoffed. "Take a look for yourself."

Dusky looked in Daria's stead. "Oh damn. Yeah, that's gotta be like a thousand people or more."

Daria shared a worrisome look with Opol. She groaned, "If only I knew what Barter would do…"

With utter confidence, Opol said, "You do."

Daria let that thought stir for but a second before it hit her. "Oh crap…I actually do know…"

"Well?!" Windy chirped with an impatient Dusky nodding in insistence.

Daria smiled with welling tears. "He'd let everyone see him, because that's who he was."

Dusky sighed. "The kid was a social butterfly."

"To say the least," Windy giggled.

Dusky went on. "The people deserve the chance to pay their respects to Barter after he devoted his last days to making theirs better."

Opol said, "I could not have said it better myself."

Mr. Martin jabbered, "Yeah-that's lovely and all, but I don't have near enough staff to handle that number of people."

Super Daria simply said, "No problem. We'll help you."

Mr. Martin seemed confused. "I'm sorry, but how can you help me run the same funeral your family is supposed to be grieving at?"

Goth Windy gave a gritty but adequate retort. "Maybe that's just how we get our grieve on bro."

"*I'm* not sure how to respond to that…"

Daria cleared the air. "Trust us, as long as you got a stack of extra business cards and lots of extra chairs, this should be a cinch."

Mr. Martin shook his head. "Sorry, but there's regulations. We can't do that even if we wanted to."

The family all grew big grins, as overcoming roadblocks had become a recently learned talent of theirs.

Opol explained it as gently as he could to the funeral home owner unfamiliar with the force of nature the family was. "You will have to forgive them, but I am afraid things like regulations will never be able to stop this family from doing what is right, and that goes double for their son today. So I would listen to Daria if I were you, because she speaks from the heart like many cannot."

"*Opol*…" Daria gushed. "See, you can't leave after this. We need you around to say awesome things like that, Awesome Opol."

Mr. Martin let out a grunting groan of discomfort. "Sorry, that just came out." He recalibrated with sinus-full breath. "Okay, granted all of you are something of—well,

you're the biggest thing in Coriander right now. *But*, I can't bend on occupancy rules; there just isn't enough space in here for that many people."

Daria shook her head and assured, "There doesn't have to be. Just listen to my plan first."

Mr. Martin could hear the crowd outside growing louder by the minute, but he hated taking risks.

"Don't worry," Windy said to the lightly sweating business owner. "You can always just tell people we strong-armed you into doing it by being pains in the asses."

Mr. Martin grinned and sighed, "Deal. So what's this *plan* of yours?"



Dusky and Daria stood at the viewing room doors with one of the assistants ready to follow their orders. Both knowing that was where they had to be for those they knew that didn't run away from this mess. Neither of them looked forward to the endless slew of condolences and melancholy cooing. The heartbroken parents stayed far enough away to not be able to see inside the casket if opened, because they still weren't ready for that yet.

Daria grumbled, "Is this like, the wrong thing to do?"

Dusky grumbled back, "Dude this was your idea."

"That's not what I mean. *What I meant*, was what if this is wrong because it's like we're turning our son's fu"—Daria choked a little on the words like a knife in the

heart—"Our son's funeral into a media circus?"

Dusky wrapped his arms around Daria like he hadn't since they were in love. "It'll be okay, and you know in your heart that's not what we're doin here. Besides, if our son were a video game addicted shut-in we'd of sent everyone home by now and been playin 1st person shooters all night. And you know if he were here he'd made this much more of a mess than we're gonna."

Daria wiped her tears away with a laugh. "Thanks Dusky, and you smell like fruity ganja, but it's kinda nice."

"Cool, its called Pineapple Expression."

Windy and Opol were in charge of identifying who was and wasn't someone they actually wanted there; not just an uninvited guest being funneled back out with the other uninvited guests. A task made easier with a stack of business cards numbered for the chairs they had to fill.

Windy worrisomely griped, "What if the person's like 'I totally know them' and I'm like 'no you don't' and then they're like 'yeah I do' and I'm like—"

Opol ended that nonsense with a chortle.

"Don't laugh at me…"

"Forgive me, I meant no offense, but I have seen you tackle far tougher tasks than this. You will be amazing as always, of that I have no doubt."

She blushed, never thinking for a second she'd look at some old monk as a revered brother. "You know, that's the kinda thing supportive brothers tell their sisters…and, I mean if you wanted, I

wouldn't mind having a big brother…"

Opol looked confused. "I thought you already considered me as such?"

Windy beamed with love as he reminded her of Barter, tearing up for a different reason than the usual. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"Perhaps you could clarify something for me, little sister?"

"What is it, big bro?"

"Does this task require physical force?"

Windy snort-chuckled. "Let's hope not."

With every remaining assistant put in the optimal place for foot-traffic directing and tending to those that would be allowed to take a seat, Mr. Martin opened the front doors.

The first wave was a frenzy of media asking the same unanswered questions they'd asked for weeks as they shoved all kinds of lenses in Mr. Martin's face.

With the aid of wisely placed rope dividers, like in a movie theatre, and an assistant or two, he began turning camera holding reporters away. "Anyone that wishes to attend this funeral that wasn't on our list of relatives must leave all cameras, phones, and recording devices in their vehicles. Also, reporters may only bring a notepad and pencil inside. And due to occupancy laws, most of you may only come in for a short amount of time to pay their respects."

The displeased rabbles began to spread as the thicket of reporters all angrily backtracked, with the exception of a few braver notepad dawning reporters smart enough to offload everything on their camera person and/or intern; smart or not, they

were still asked to wait ahead of others without notepads.

Mr. Martin made sure to send some of those making the long trek back to their vehicles with the words, "And would anyone please tell anyone else you see on the way the same as I have told you here and now."

It wasn't long before Windella and Opol were in the thicket of the funeral.

Davidson's and Garcia's that hadn't been around for years balled as though they were close buddies, but really just seeking attention by riding upon their family's mournful coattails.

It took Opol and Windy only a few dozen people before they got the hang of it, finding a box of tissues to be their most important commodity. However, it wasn't long before one of the biggest drama queens they'd ever seen shoved her way past Mr. Martin and set the whole ordeal ablaze early.

"Esmerelda!" Esmerelda's mother harped as her daughter ditched her. "Damn it girl! You're grounded forever after this!"

Esmerelda stomped up to Opol and Windy an enraged bounce of curls and banana-yellow dress. "Where's Barter?!" Before her huffy query could be answered, she leaned in and quietly hissed at them, "And don't you dare give me all that *he's dead* stuff. I know this is just some trick to do some crazy politics stuff that I don't understand."

Honestly, neither the mindful monk nor the gallant goth had a gram of an idea what to do about that.

The dramatic young woman whispered, "I'm Barter's girlfriend, we totally kissed and held hands."

Opol and Windy shared a curious brow-raise with a little on the same page.

Windy said, "Oh yeah, I remember you now. It's nice to see you again."

Esmerelda politely curtsied. "You as well. Now where is he?"

Opol calmly pointed to the viewing room and the young girl was off on a mission that wasn't going to end well.

Esmerelda's mother huffed to a halt, done dealing with Mr. Martin just in time to watch her daughter zip away. "Shit." She looked at the two greeters with guilt.

Windy and Opol just grinned as if they understood overzealous youth all too well.

"Sorry. Esmerelda's a handful, but she really-really cared for Barter and she's having so much trouble because of it lately. So-like I saw this show and it didn't help at all, but that lead me to this book that talked about closure—and I'm rambling at your brother's funeral…I'm so sorry for your loss. I personally can't—I just—I couldn't, I just can't…"

Windy handed her a couple cards for her and her daughter. "Here, in case you and Esmerelda wanna take a seat and stay for a while."

Opol urgently aided the mother by saying, "I would catch up to her if I were you."

"Thank you." Esmerelda's mom huffed off after her daughter for the billionth time.

Dusky and Daria didn't hesitate to wave the young woman and her exhausted mother inside.

Daria whispered to Dusky, "That little girl's from Barter's class, but she doesn't look sad…"

Dusky looked back at the confident young woman patiently waiting for Daria's gushing aunt to finish crying all over the casket. "Yeah, this aint gonna be good. That girl looks like she doesn't think she's at a funeral."

A studious assistant wiped off the smudged casket as the aunt walked away.

With her mother prattling about important stuff she was in no way listening to, Esmerelda promptly walked up to the casket. She grabbed the lid and opened it without a thought. Her face stuttered a step or two at the sight of his pale skin. Esmerelda's voice softened and cracked as she placed a hand upon his ice cold cheek and said, "Wake up Barter, it's me…"

Esmerelda's mother was right there holding her daughter's shoulders and steadying her swerving legs.

"Why, why's he like that mom? Is he cursed and needs a true love kiss?"

"No sweetheart," the mother sadly hummed, knowing she'd only the truth left now. "He's no longer alive."

A dire terror dour the girl's sunny disposition. "But-but, that's not… Barter's just a kid and Esmerelda loves him-so he can't do that, he can't do that, it's not okay…" Unfortunately for brazen young girls with big hearts, like Esmerelda, it took a little longer for the worst of the worst to make its way past their natural walls of wonderment.

Daria watched the girl pass out in her mother's arms from shock and grumbled at Dusky, "You called it."

The family managed to make it through that fiasco and a few hundred peoples' more.

A great amount of the folks were weirdos wanting to be a part of something and media monkeys monetizing the lives of others, but all of them were respectful.

Thankfully, the many familiar faces, such as Luigi and Ms. Yano, rekindled the family's hope in humankind with their unbridled sincerity and inability to hold in tears at all. A computer genius named Anderson and a former camera man named Izzy adding quirk to an otherwise dreary day with their new found team-up, Anderson leaving a booklet of printed pages with Barter's body consisting of countless positive feedback about their website and the hundreds of real life issues already helped. Lucian Lurgckwhilletk earning himself a seat, as funerals were one of the few places being an esteemed psychologist makes you the life of the party.

As a hundred or so more people rolled through but half an hour later, the family was growing wearier by the minute. Little did they know, help was on the way.

Their first full-personality of an ally came cruising in bandaged like she'd been in a bar brawl.

"Hey ya'll," Diana Folknor said without her usual upbeat pep; a well-dressed Jimmyman behind her, J shirt slightly hidden under his light-blue suit jacket and jeans. "I heard about…and…I hate cryin so I aint gonna do it. And this is Jimmy, he kinda saved my life the other day; it's a long story."

Jimmy politely said, "Nice to meet you, I'm her boyfriend."

"Jimmy," Diana chirped at him, "You said you'd behave." She clarified, "We've

been on one date—"

Jimmy re-clarified, "Three dates—"

"*We've* been on *three* dates…" She gave him a warning smirk.

Jimmyman grinned wide as he said, "Sorry, I'm just proud of being here supporting such a beautiful and smart young woman like you."

Diana selfishly gushed, "Well-yeah-I guess I do see how that's completely true."

Opol said, "I have missed your vigor, Diana."

"Me too," Windy agreed.

"Well aren't you two just as sweet as sweet tea… Again, I hate cryin and aint gonna do it, but I'm so very deeply sorry for your loss and…" Diana's nostrils flared as she fought back the sad, awkwardly croaking, "And is Daria, I mean of course she is, but—"

Windy gave Diana a hug and handed her two cards. "Over that way, okay." Windy did her best to hold her own tears for Diana's sake.

Jimmy gently shook both of their hands as he informed them that, "Barter will always be a hero to me. He taught me that I could be Jimmyman"—he flashed the J on his shirt—"And now I help people in need."

Both of them beamed at the big man carrying the spirit of Barter with him.

It wasn't minutes later before Diana and Jimmyman were aiding an overwhelmed Daria and Dusky.

But Windy and Opol's aid had been patiently waiting behind those couple of witnesses to his recent crimes and acts of redemption.

"It's nice ta see ya again, Windella,"

R-Stank said, his hair nicely braided by his grandmother and his gangbanger garb replaced by a buttoned shirt.

Windy recognized that platinum smile, but not most of the kempt man behind it. "R-Stank?"

R-Stank rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. "Actually, it's Dwayne."

Opol could but shrug at Windy's angrily confused look.

Windy questionably queried, "Why're you here?"

Dwayne opened his mouth to let it out, but a nearby Diana squawked, "I know you!"

The keen-eyed reporter stomped up to him and said, "You're the guy that knocked out the other guy pointin a gun at me; you helped save my life. Thanks."

Dwayne cleared his throat. "You're welcome."

Windy chirped, "What-the-what now?"

Diana whispered to Windy, "Good man," before zipping back off to voluntarily boss people around.

Worried he might not get another chance with all the commotion still coming in, Dwayne dropped his truth. "I quit everythin; drug dealin, gang-bangin, I quit all that shit. And I did all this cause, ya know, when it came down ta it, I was thinkin bout what ya said and what I really wanted in life"—his next words caught a little upon his uncertainty as they made it out anyways—"And it was just ta get naked with ya and whatnot-but like in a respectful girlfriend kinda way. Oh-but not today, nah. Today I'm just here ta like support ya and shit that gentlemen do for ladies at funerals."

Windy was flabbergasted, mostly by the

fact that she'd told this man he had a choice and he actually made a good one.

Thankfully, her wise big brother was there to aid her. "I do believe, despite his lack of proper iteration, that this young man just expressed his complete admiration and desire to be yours."

After spending most this day and those before it in utter misery, Windy wasn't expecting to feel such a happy heart-flutter. "Oh," she humbly squeaked.

As a new wave of wandering woe-bearers overwhelmed Mr. Martin, Opol inquired of the muscular young man, "Do you have any experience in directing people?"

Not sure if chasing down meth-heads that owed you or bouncing at a dive bar counted, Dwayne replied, "Kinda sorta?"

"Good enough."

The next onslaught was indeed difficult for the family to get through, but they persevered with the aid of allies made because of Barter.

Kind faces once again eased the burden of working hard on such a day, Harold and Hanna bringing everyone little bags of fresh fruit to keep them healthy; even managing to brave their quickly dissolved fears as they left a special bag of candy in Barter's casket. Even Gabby and her oddly stoic arm-candy brought relief in the form of a flat of organic coffees with lots of whip cream.

Soon the masses had made their mess and moved on as the foot-traffic reached normal funeral status.

Mr. Martin began turning away media people supposedly late to the game, most just trying to get a few new shots in as they pretended they didn't know the rules.

With the seats now all full, the family felt it was time without needing to exchange a word.

Daria and Dusky simply gave Opol and Windy a sad grin as they walked to them, leaving Dwayne to aid Mr. Martin in turning people away.

"Excuse me!?" A familiar voice called as the short bald man attached to it slipped past the larger men, ducking under one of the dividers with ease. "I need to talk to you!"

The family turned around.

Windy's face puckered with anger. "You're that creeper from this morning."

"*No*," the man refuted with benevolent exasperation, "I'm not. I'm——"

Windy rolled up her non-existent sleeves as a wall of intimidating Dwayne loomed behind the man. She snarled, "Oh the next words you say had better be good, because they're gonna be your last."

The man defensively lifted his bag and boldly drummed, "I have paperwork!"

As they took a moment of confused silence, Dusky whispered to Daria, "I thought he was gonna say I have a bomb."

"Not helping," Daria hissed at him.

Windy shook her head at the man. "Those were awful last words."

The man's tremulous tone didn't cease his words. "I have notarized papers for a Mr. Barter Davidson-Garcia's family."

Daria quickly intervened, "Hold on, what did you say?"

The man's voice relaxed as a Dwayne eased off and he better explained himself. "My name is Samuel, I'm a lawyer and I have notarized papers for a Mr. Barter Davidson-

Garcia's family."

Everyone was still irrefutably lost.

Samuel did his best to explain. "I was called to the hospital where I met with a uh-um—a *remarkable* young man who had me write up a very special will he requested read at his funeral. I know this is abnormal and—"

Daring Dusky dropped a very important question in interruption, "Why're we just gettin this thing now?!"

As a lawyer, Samuel wasn't used to being honest about his mistakes, but he did it anyways. "As I said before, Mr. Barter was a remarkable young man. He made me question the very nature of what I do and who I am, but he also made me promise to bring this to you only on the day of his funeral along with a message." Samuel removed the document from his bag and a tablet with a special video ready to play.

With a few finger-swipes, Barter's face was goofily agape on it. **"Is it on? …Oh-okay. Hi family!"**

Everyone's faces lit up as tears of joy teemed upon the edges of their eyes. None of them had expected to see Barter's smiling face again.

"Barter is making this video because he's got one team mission left for all of you, and because he's sorry he's gone now. He loves you all very much, but right now he really needs you to read his will out loud to everyone there. Please, you'll understand why when you do. Also, there's a lot more short videos I did for you on this thing; I hope you enjoy them. Goodbye family, please remember that it's okay to be sad and it's okay to be happy; just make sure you do

both. …Is this the off bu—"

Loving palms fell upon Daria's shoulders as she lowered her face into her hands and burst into tears. Daria's head rose soon after with a proud and supportive grin; tears be damned. She looked ahead to give only the greatest of praise to Samuel, but he was simply gone.

Windy asked Dwayne, "Where'd the little bald guy go?"

Dwayne replied, "Dude just up and left."

Mr. Martin shut the doors and locked them. He walked up to the family. "We're ready to proceed whenever you are, and please take the rest of the time to grieve as you must, we can handle the rest of this."

"Thank you," Daria said, because she still had plenty of thanks to give.

The rest of the family expressing similar gratitude as Mr. Martin moved to the viewing room to make sure everyone was seated and things were ready.

They made their way without hesitation, their brave young leader still by their side. The four of them felt all eyes on them, but the only thing that mattered to the four of them now was Barter's words beckoning to be read.

Daria took the podium as the others stood behind her, entrusting the tablet to Opol's steady hands. Anxiety became but an afterthought upon seeing so many kind faces looking back at her. "Thank you for being here." She laughed a little as she said, "Barter would've been proud of how much trouble he caused today."

The crowd laughed along with her.

Daria could feel yet another explosion of tears coming and simply went on with it. "Anyways, I have something here for him that he wanted us to read to all of you today." She took a deep breath and opened the first page of the legal document. Daria read, "This is the living, spiritual, and material will of Ba…Barter Davidson-Garcia," and could read no more. Those words alone had left her too choked-up to continue.

Dusky politely took the lead as he read on. "I, Barter Davidson-Garcia, herby leave everything I own to my family, but I leave the rest of me to all of you; the people of planet earth. I leave you my hopes and *dreams*…" Dusky had lasted longer than Daria, but he was forced to bow out as the sad stole his voice.

Windy took to reading in his stead with a gentle hand upon his back. "I leave you my hopes and dreams. I leave you my equally amazing family members. I leave you with the knowledge that if an 8 year old can make a difference, like I did, than any one of you can do far more. *So*…" Windy finally lost it as well, Barter's words feeling too close to her heart to continue.

Opol took her place as he handed off the tablet, which Windy hugged close to her. "So from me to you, my final request is that all of you stop ignoring how you feel and who you've hurt because you're afraid of it; own your mistakes, stop listening to those that use fear and convenience to make you trust their leadership. And don't let anyone own your time but you, because time is the one thing you'll always wish you had more of. I know you can do it, because lastly I leave you my boundless love and unstoppable

trust. This concludes the last will and testament of Barter Davidson-Garcia…" He sat the document down and smiled as he cried, the family hugging around him as they joined in with the same tears and smiles.

The crowd was lost in their own emotions the same as them.

Many a people of all kind and creed had come to say goodbye to the boy that had forever changed their lives; directly or indirectly. And his final words would spread from there like a revolution of change lead by families of common sense crusaders. For it isn't the greatness we inhabit in our lives that defines who we are, it's the lessons we leave behind. It's the history we remember to read. It's the fair trades we choose to barter for above the lucrative ones. It's the humanities we put above economies. And it's any boy or girl brave enough to stand amongst a world of people being put upon their knees by the indifferences of their rulers as much as their own.

For this writer personally, it's choosing something different…

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And to everyone everywhere, please find a way to come together. Fuck our pride and fuck our headstrong beliefs. We as people truly need only one thing to feel and be amazing; each other.